

THE MYTH THAT IS TRUE

**DISCOVERING THE SUPERNATURAL
WORLDVIEW OF THE BIBLE**

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Completed first draft of *The Myth That Is True* (January 2, 2012)

NOTES:

- 1. This draft is not for distribution in email or on the web in any form.** The draft will remain on the web page designated for it until the end of January, 2012, at which time it will be removed from the web, along with older portions.
- 2. New Structure.** Section headings and division of chapters within those headings has changed since the last (2010) draft. Some of these changes are preparatory to revisions I will be making when editing this first draft.
- 3. New Chapters** are indicated. Since chapters have been moved around several times, there will be points of incongruence in the overall flow (especially in footnotes where I refer to chapters by number). That will be corrected in the next round (#5).
- 4. “Rewritten Material”** refers to rewriting beyond a mere edit. In some cases it is substantial.
- 5. The draft is complete only in the sense that it is a first draft.** The plan from this point is to do a close read-through and edit. This will involve more than reader corrections (and I have many of those to consult – which is appreciated). It will involve a lot of re-writing, deleting some material, adding other things, though I don’t imagine that will amount to a lot of content. Some things just have to wait. For example, one of the things I know I will do is include one page summaries with each section header and end-of-section summaries – reviewing where we’ve been and why, and where we’re going next. The aim of round two will be greater coherence and clarity. It needs help there. I will do this toward making the manuscript presentable as a book to a publisher. I do not plan to put that second draft online.

[Preface](#) (Rewritten Material)

[Introduction](#) (Rewritten Material)

Setting the Stage

[Chapter 1](#) – Muzzling the Dragon **NEW**

[Chapter 2](#) – God’s Heavenly Household

[Chapter 3](#) – God’s Wisdom

[Chapter 4](#) – As in Heaven, So on Earth

Chaos Erupts

[Chapter 5](#) – Costly Decisions (Rewritten Material)

[Chapter 6](#) – Appearances Can be Deceiving

[Chapter 7](#) – The Bad Seed

[Chapter 8](#) – A Tall Order

[Chapter 9](#) – And God Gave Them Up

Divine Intervention

[Chapter 10](#) – An Unexpected Word

[Chapter 11](#) – Seeing God’s Name

[Chapter 12](#) – Growing Pains

[Chapter 13](#) – God’s Home Address

[Chapter 14](#) – God’s Family, God’s Rules

[Chapter 15](#) – Follow the Template (New; old 17 with some Rewritten Material)

A Turn for the Worst

[Chapter 16](#) – Like a Bad Penny (old 15)

[Chapter 17](#) – Devoted to Destruction (old 16)

[Chapter 18](#) – Divine Kingship

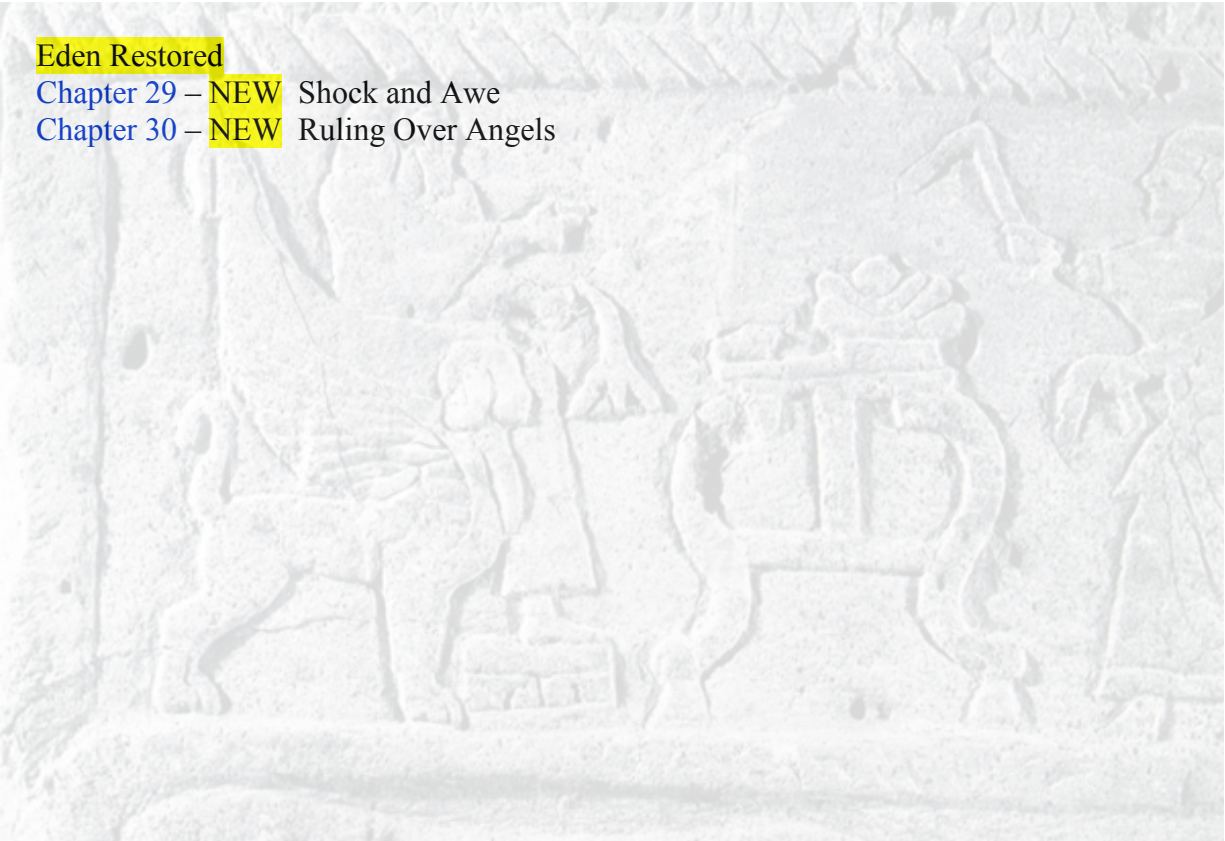
Chapter 19 – Standing in the Council
Chapter 20 – Gone, But Not Forgotten
Chapter 21 – Thy Kingdom Come

Hidden in Plain Sight

Chapter 22 – The Human One
Chapter 23 – Pre-Eminent Domain
Chapter 24 – Stealth Tactic (some added material)
Chapter 25 – Unseen Siege
Chapter 26 – Infiltration
Chapter 27 – Knowing Your Identity
Chapter 28 – Choosing Sides

Eden Restored

Chapter 29 – NEW Shock and Awe
Chapter 30 – NEW Ruling Over Angels



The Myth That is True: Rediscovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible

Michael S. Heiser, 2006-2011



Don't Skip the Preface

I want to be up front with you right from the start. This book will introduce you to ideas that you've never heard of before—not from your pastor, a radio preacher, a home Bible study, or even a formal class about the Bible. Some of what you read will startle you. The flip side of that coin, though, is that it will also delight you, if you're the kind of person who's long had the feeling that God's Word just has to be more than a repository of self-help platitudes, or a collection of tales from antiquity, or a handbook of traditions that keep God tame in a tidy theological box.

I've Been Where You'll Be Going

I remember having such an inkling. It seems long ago now, but it really isn't. My journey was prompted by a couple of things. One was a strong sense that my Christian life really did have a *cosmic* purpose. I don't say that because I had something unusual happen to me after I became a Christian. Quite the contrary. My life has been spectacularly mundane. I haven't had a Damascus Road encounter. I wasn't the chief of sinners. But it was actually the ordinariness of it all, juxtaposed to what I read of God's plan for all things, that fascinated me. The closer my mind's eye scrutinizes my past, a host of quiet, apparently inconsequential moments and decisions scream the providence of God.

It's kind of like watching *It's a Wonderful Life*, where George Bailey's life turns on common events that happen every day: a good deed gets misunderstood; someone in the family dies; you pass up a long-anticipated opportunity thinking the chance will come again; an impetuous moment overrides good advice; a spasm of loyalty grants someone else success and your continued obscurity. George doesn't notice how any of it matters for things yet future, or how the lives of the people of Bedford Falls are connected in the providence of God. For my own part, looking back I see the ordinary deeds of steadfast friends and passing acquaintances, frivolous remarks that provided unintended clarity, flashes of insight sparked by the seemingly unconscious behavior of others. There were crushing failures and unexpected deliverances, steps of faith and decisions by indecision. And every one of them a signpost to destiny, a destiny that itself is part of a mysterious, sweeping, comprehensive plan. A plan conceived long ago in the mind of God with very specific intent—a plan that somehow includes me . . . and you.

This small appreciation for the intricacy of the divine plan that encompasses everyone and all things gave me a strong sense of confidence in the good intentions and powerful abilities of God and the coherence of his decision to reveal himself to us. All roads would eventually lead to and validate both. This was to be a special grace to me, as the Spirit instilled the conviction within me very soon after I came to Christ that my life was going to be focused on the academic study of Scripture. Through a growth process I could not discern, I was blessed

with the intuition that the passages many people considered weird or difficult were more important than most had conceived. They were there for a reason. They were part of a comprehensibly presented, purposeful revelation. They had a role to play in the cosmic drama of Scripture. They were windows through which we could discern the coherence of the divine agenda—if we had the courage to believe what we saw.

Our Context Isn't the Bible's Context

I can't point to the dawning of this realization, but I came to suspect that the key to understanding such texts—and really the entire biblical revelation—was to approach them the way the ancients would have on their own terms. People who claim to be serious about the Bible often expend a lot of energy talking about how it needs to be interpreted in context—but then turn around and filter it through their own traditions. The context for correctly understanding the Bible is not the Church Fathers. Biblical theology neither began nor ended with Augustine. It is also not the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformation, or modern evangelicalism. Rather, the correct context for interpreting the Bible is the context in which it was produced—the ancient Near East and Mediterranean. Talk about having a firm grasp on the obvious.

Put another way, it was God who decided when in history to move human beings to record information about Himself and His plan. God was the one who decided when, where, why, and to whom that process we call “inspiration” would be in operation. This truth is important, even vital, for being honest with the Bible and what it says. Early church fathers and the reformers after them had access to some material that could give them some insight into those cultures of ages long past. But they had glaring weaknesses as interpreters, through no fault of their own, for the most part. Most of them, for example, couldn't read Hebrew, the primary language of the Old Testament. Some of the more famous early fathers couldn't even read Greek. Augustine had only a rudimentary knowledge of Greek and had no knowledge of Hebrew, and yet his opinions on many matters of interpretation were to become the final word in Christian theology.

Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin were more adept in the biblical languages, and had the benefit of the theological thought that accrued to the writings of the early church fathers, but they too were severely handicapped in ways that work to the advantage of modern biblical scholars. For example, the Hebrew Bible was the product of a world that wouldn't be well known until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was the period that saw the decipherment of the languages of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan. The languages, literature, and archaeological remains of these contexts contemporary to ancient Israel provided a myriad of insights about the culture, language, worldview, and spiritual practices revealed in the Old Testament. Biblical theologians and pastors studying prior to the 19th century had access to none of this material. I admire these great minds of the past, but what I'm describing is true. If you sent me into a room without my glasses with a list of things to find, I'd probably find some of them, but I'd pass right by others.

We shouldn't harbor the false impression that interpreting the New Testament escapes these pitfalls because it's “closer to our time.” Two thousand years ago really isn't close to our

time. It wasn't even close to Augustine's time, either. By the time Augustine came on the scene, Jesus had been risen for over 300 years—longer than the United States has been a country. Do we have the correct context for understanding people in the colonial period? Maybe for some things, but we're quite a bit removed from their mindset. But the more we steep ourselves in their everyday existence through the physical objects they used or owned, the places they lived, original documents, and personal correspondences, our understanding improves. That's what we need for the Bible—to get inside their heads as much as possible. That means comprehending their world, and that in turn begins long before the New Testament era.

Understanding the Old Testament is critical for every Christian for one simple reason: it is the wellspring of the New Testament. As brilliant as the church fathers and reformers were, their resources were restricted. Their articulation of biblical theology consequently reflects those limitations. One cannot claim to interpret the New Testament accurately apart from an accurate understanding of the Old Testament—and that in turn is not possible without an accurate understanding of the original ancient Near Eastern context of the Old Testament, chosen under the providence of God. It's like skipping ingredients in a recipe. The result may be edible, but it won't be nearly as delicious as something prepared properly.

A Promise Not to Protect You from the Bible

I didn't have to be convinced that it was not a careless or capricious decision on God's part to dispense His revelation at the time that he did, and against the cultural backdrop of that time. It was a much tougher sell to surrender the desire to fit the Bible into my own pre-packaged theological system. What would it mean to take the Bible on its own terms and to essentially just let the chips fall where they may? I soon learned that going down that path necessitated abandoning a myth that many well-meaning evangelical teachers and scholars have helped perpetuate: that the biblical writers shared nothing in common in terms with the surrounding cultures when it came to religion. Now that I'm on the other side of several graduate degrees involving ancient Near Eastern studies, I can tell you that the average Christian's exposure to "ancient backgrounds for the Bible" is a delicate exposure that can only be described as procedurally safe. It's one thing to hold up a pot or a cuneiform text that talks about a marriage law and wax eloquent about how it illumines the Bible. It's quite another to point out that the Old Testament's view of the afterlife wasn't quite what the Westminster Confession described, but was closer to what other ancient people outside Israel believed.

After reading the Old Testament and other ancient material from the biblical period closely, I discovered a number of items that didn't jive with traditional ways of formulating biblical theology. I had to make a choice. Was I willing to side with the Bible when its own content, illumined by a deep knowledge of the ancient world in which God moved people to produce it, deviated from what I had been taught in my modern evangelical context? Again, a special grace compelled me to think that choosing the Bible wasn't going to hurt my faith. God was the same God then as he is now. I wasn't going to understand the text by making its writers fit into molds created by theologians who lived centuries after its creation and who worked without access to its ancient cultural context. The Bible would be okay, and so would I. I just

needed to trust God. People didn't need to be protected from the Bible, and I didn't need to protect it from itself.

I'd like to tell you that I never had any doubts or concerns after my decision to let the Bible be what it is, but I'll spare you the condescension. When I began my intellectual and spiritual journey, I had no map and no directions. It was a little scary at times. I often wondered where I'd wind up.

I came to discover what I'm going to share with you only by providences like those I mentioned earlier. I wish I could relate the dozens of times I went to a library searching for something I thought would help only to be guided by what seemed like random events to a resource I'd never heard of that almost instantly reordered some problem in my mind. It was like being on a journey that I was *supposed* to take. And so it was and is. I want you to experience the joy of the same journey of discovery. That's the reason for this book. I can't promise that your journey through these pages will always be comfortable. What I can say with confidence is that you'll never look at your Bible the same way again. And while we're on that subject, I need to say a few things about what the Bible is and isn't.

The Bible: A Very Ordinary Supernatural Book

Christians readily accept the notion that God uses people to accomplish His will. But somehow we've been unconsciously trained to think that anything God does must be supernatural. That just isn't the case, even in biblical times. Most of what God does is behind the scenes, unseen and unappreciated until hindsight opens our eyes.

Take the Bible. We often view its production as something out of a science fiction novel. The prophet wakes up, starts breakfast, and then gets zapped by the invisible Spirit. Having no control over his body or brain, the prophet's arm, wrist, and hand pick up a stylus in response to an unspoken command. Entranced in a zombie-like stupor, he starts writing words dictated into his head by the Spirit of God. When the Spirit releases him he looks down in amazement at what the encounter produced. That's an X-Files episode, not good theology.

The truth is that the people who wrote the Bible were very ordinary, and what they wrote followed the normal conventions of writing books for their day in virtually every detail. On occasion, God did directly dictate material, but that kind of thing is actually very rare in the Bible. Most of the time, the writer was apparently unaware the Spirit of God was doing anything special when he wrote. We know that's true for many reasons. One would be that we have four gospels which, while recording the same life of Jesus, frequently differ in their presentation, particularly if you count the exact word choices. If God was dictating everything, why would he have to dictate it with different vocabulary each time? Did he leave things out of one gospel and not another to be playful or capricious? Couldn't God get it right? Did the exact words uttered in any given scene keep changing? Even when the gospel accounts agree substantially there are still small differences in the original language like verb tense or word order. Scripture was demonstrably *not* dictated. That's very important, since I'll be showing you how ancient texts outside the Bible have a lot of content

that sounds like the Bible—precisely because the biblical writers used it and were informed by it.

All that said, we ought not presuppose that the human writers were abandoned to *only* their own abilities. The process was definitely human, but not *exclusively* human. Rather, they were free to write as they felt emotionally compelled and moved, and as they were trained or not trained. Biblical writers followed ordinary forms of literature in their writing. If the biblical writer was describing a covenant treaty between God and his people, his description conforms in style to covenant treaties known elsewhere in the ancient world. To depart from this style would have been to prompt the question from a reader, “What kind of covenant treaty is *this*? Didn’t this guy know how to write one?” The apostle Paul writes his letters to the churches in a recognizable style and with an expected format. Those who read Paul’s letters knew what a letter was supposed to sound like. Just as we wouldn’t write a letter home to Mom and put footnotes in it, or jot down a recipe and lace it with legal mumbo-jumbo, so the biblical writers wrote as expected by their audience.

Biblical writers were also influenced by written material known in their time that wasn’t inspired by the God of the Bible. Just as preachers today quote poetry, Bible commentaries, encyclopedia articles, or TIME® magazine to drive home a point, so did the biblical writers. Paul quotes from pagan Greek poets.¹ The psalmists and prophets borrow vocabulary and lines of material from the literature of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syria (especially the literature of a place called Ugarit).² Some New Testament passages draw from ideas found in ancient Jewish books that, while deemed useful by many Jews and Christians, were not considered inspired. The biblical writers were not endorsing this kind of material as, but they did find it valuable for their theology.

Although the fact that the biblical writers do this kind of thing may be unfamiliar to you, it will be very important on our journey. Some things the Bible says can only be correctly understood when we situate what is said in its ancient context. The Bible is certainly for our benefit, and the benefit of those living a thousand years from now. But the Bible was not written for us as the immediately intended audience. It’s an ancient work, and we must understand it on its own terms. It was God’s decision to reveal truth and have that truth recorded at an ancient point in history and in an ancient context. We don’t do it justice by ignoring all that. We don’t know better than God, and dispensing with the ancient environment doesn’t make the Bible more understandable—it in fact distorts or impairs its meaning. Situating the Bible in its ancient social, historical and, yes, *religious* context doesn’t harm the Bible—it *illuminates* the Bible for people like us who are culturally removed from its original context.

A Disclaimer of Sorts

I should telegraph one last thing about this book. By design I have tried to keep it uncluttered by lots of Hebrew and Greek words and technical jargon. At times that was unavoidable, but my goal was to put forth what I want to get across as straightforwardly and concisely as possible. What we’ll talk about at times is mind-bending enough without long rabbit-trails on word studies, or technical grammatical issues from the original Hebrew and Greek.

Whenever I felt myself unnecessarily lapsing into academese, I've inserted a footnote directing you to a more detailed analysis of some issue. The footnotes will direct you to the website devoted to this book.³ While I could have avoided footnotes completely, I want you to know that everything you'll read in the book, though often quite different, can be well supported by scholarly, peer-reviewed work in the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible. None of it is contrived or idiosyncratic. It's all based on solid scholarship, and if you can digest that sort of thing, you can check it out on the website.

¹ For example, Acts 17:28 (Epimenides, 600 B.C.; Aratus, 315–240 B.C.); I Cor 15:33 (Menander, 342–291 B.C., or Euripedes, 480–406 B.C.).

² For example, Prov. 22:17–24:22 (Wisdom of Amenemope).

³ This website (www.themyththatistrue.com) is not yet active.



Introduction:

The Bible—How Much Do You Really Believe It?

Some readers surely noticed that the title of this book borrows a line from J. R. R. Tolkien, the literary genius whose creativity and scholarship gave the world *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. With respect to the similarities between the biblical storyline and well-known mythologies from the ancient world, Tolkien acknowledged the commonalities but asserted with confidence that the Bible was God's "true myth."

True Myth

A lot of readers will naturally be uncomfortable with the use of the word "myth" with respect to the Bible. That's understandable since that word is often used today to cast something as being untrue or unhistorical. That isn't what Tolkien meant, and it isn't what I mean. In broad terms, when speaking of literature like the Bible, "myth" refers to a document or story where divine characters are an integral part of the story. The Bible certainly qualifies in that respect! One writer summarized the thoughts of Tolkien, as well as those of his friend and colleague, also a literary scholar, C. S. Lewis, on the matter:

"... [Myth is] a means of communicating truth that could not be conveyed in any other way. All myths and all religions . . . contained some aspect, some distorted reflection of the True Myth, which is the Gospel as revealed in the Bible . . . [In] Christianity - and only in Christianity - myth has entered into reality and history. Far from being fantasy or fiction created by fertile human imaginations, myth was for Tolkien a way of knowing truth. Myth was a literary form and, at the same time, a way of capturing a glimpse of the transcendent truths of existence. In the Gospel, that Truth had entered into history and reality, and the Christian Myth was the singular truth to which all other stories pointed and from which they actually grew."⁴

Academically speaking, those scholars who wish to strip the Bible of its miraculous events and otherworldly qualities since they cannot be explained empirically by science are said to be "de-mythologizing" the Bible. I have no interest in such an approach. In fact, my goal is to *re-mythologize* the Bible for a contemporary generation by encouraging people—Christians among them—to believe that the unseen world is truer and more real than the world in which we live. And that brings me to what I see as the fundamental problem I want to address in this book.

C. S. Lewis once said, "The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity."⁵ As I see it, the Bible's supernatural narrative—its description of the otherworldly conflict raging

all around us—has been lost to view because of a veil of familiarity that modern preachers, teachers, and scholars have draped around it. For sure most serious Christians would insist that they have not dumped their belief in miracles or the spiritual world. And yet something inside us as moderns compels us to not believe in an invisible, animate world or universe. We tend to accept as “supernatural” only that which we *must* accept or else we’d deny the faith, but no more. There are a couple of reasons for this.

Skeptical Believers

For one thing, we aren’t as open to the “supernatural” as we think we are. Many Christians are supernaturalists who think like skeptics. Ask yourself what would be going through your mind if a Christian friend confided in you one day that they believed they had been helped by a guardian angel, or that they audibly heard a disembodied voice warning them of some unforeseeable danger, or that they had seen an image of Jesus in some moment of crisis. What if they related an incident akin to Martin Luther’s so many centuries ago, about throwing an inkwell at a demon that had been tormenting him while he tried to work on his translation of the Bible into German? What if your friend was convinced God had directed their life in some way through a dream? Or that their believing spouse had “said goodbye” to them in a brief encounter *after* death? Most of us would have to admit that our initial impulse would be one of doubt about what we were hearing. Our mind would immediately consider the possibility of other explanations—in fact we would *seek* other explanations because our modern inclination is to insist on verifiable evidence. We might even recommend counseling or a physical.

I don’t bring this issue up because I think we should get our theology from experience. As you’ll find out, I think spiritual beings can and do seek to deceive us, and we need our theology to be rooted in the text. However, our modern, rationalistic evangelical sub-culture has trained us to think that our theology *precludes* these experiences or this kind of contact. I can recall in my own life hearing faithful missionaries relate dramatic encounters with demons in some uncivilized country and thinking that there could have been some other explanations given the primitive outlook of the people involved. In my thinking back then, the more given to superstition (i.e., the less modern) that people were, the more such things got reported. I didn’t realize it until later that I had just transformed what the apostles would have called another day on the job (or the advance of the kingdom of God) a case of unenlightened superstition.

To some extent this is understandable, given the abusive manipulation of people through alleged “spiritual experiences” perpetrated in certain sectors of Christianity. But I’m not talking about attention-seekers and their lust for power over people. Nor do I have in view the innocent churchgoer who is under the spiritual abuse of having his or her commitment to Jesus judged by the presence or absence of a paranormal encounter. It’s a perversion of the gospel to convince people that they aren’t close to God unless they’ve got their own personal “miracle” that validates their testimony. I’m talking about the personal and private and, most importantly, the content of the biblical text.

Whether we want to admit it or not, since we live in a modern scientific age, we are prone to think these kinds of experiences are misinterpretations of some other happenstance, or something that is treatable with the right medication. We would think it absolutely unwarranted to insist on scientific evidence for the virgin birth, insisting that faith is required. Why then do many Christians call on academic SWAT teams to explain away other “weird” passages? Aren’t those important? Does acceptance of the supernatural extend only to the items referenced in creeds and confessions?

The truth is that we just aren’t open to the regularity of the spiritual conflict that goes on behind the veil of our five terrestrial senses and, as I will show in this book, we are quite ignorant—sometimes willfully—of the “mythic past” of that conflict described in the Bible. The result is that very people who should be predisposed to embracing the reality of the otherworldly find it foreign territory. Christians have desensitized themselves to the spiritual world. We talk as if we wished we lived in apostolic days, but my guess is that most of us would be scared to death at the spiritual conflict they regularly experienced.

Bored Consumers

A second reason the Bible has become hidden behind the “veil of familiarity” is that Christians have been unconsciously trained to think of the Bible as *merely* a handbook for the mundane. We certainly need the Bible’s guidance for things like marriage, parenting, ethics, and social responsibility, but the Bible is *more* than a book of advice. When this is the portrayal of the Bible presented to people sermon after sermon, year after year, that’s what the Bible becomes to them. I’ve had preachers tell me that when they try to go beyond therapeutic sermons, many in their congregation complain that the effort was misguided and the outcome not “relevant.” Pastors are easily tempted to be shallow (and many have been trained to be so) due to the Church’s attitude of consumerism. If they get too “impractical” people have other choices and will go elsewhere.

The result of this utilitarian cycle is that our churches are filled with people who mentally divorce thinking deeply about the biblical text from living for Christ. Pondering the text for any other reason than to get a spiritual buzz is at best nerdy and at worst cold-hearted. Their senses are dulled to the Bible’s story of the otherworldly drama working its way out on earthly soil. Sermons peppered with pithy platitudes about life are considered to meet life’s problems and induce the feeling of knowing God. But the effects are very temporary. Shaping or sharpening a worldview takes more time and effort, though the payoff is exponentially more enduring. And as each generation’s theological imagination atrophies, the Church produces an abundance of pastors who, though godly, look at the Bible the same way.

Sunday School Shouldn’t Be Forever

A final reason for the presence and endurance of the veil of familiarity is that it is far easier to consider the Bible a collection of stories that affirm our traditions than spend the time it takes to closely scrutinize what it says, especially the parts that are foreign to our minds, and then figure out how the parts fit into the whole. If we give some sincere thought to the

majority of the sermons we have heard, many amount to little more than repetition of the words in the Bible that we can read by ourselves. What we hear on a Sunday morning is essentially Sunday School stories that last longer, with a few points of application that would be lost on anyone who isn't an adult. A "deep" sermon is one that involves the passing mention of a Greek or Hebrew word on the way to reminding us to read our Bibles, pray, support the church financially, and be nice to other people.

Most pastors are certainly capable of more than this. It's easy for them to defend themselves, too, as they can legitimately point to their congregation's low tolerance for detailed content. But in my experience, the real problem is that the mythic narrative underneath the surface of Bible stories awaits discovery for most Christians, even pastors. They cannot consider something that they were never taught profound or practical or even stimulating. It's time that changed.

Theological Joyriding

So what are we to do? As my title suggests, I believe we need to rediscover the cosmic worldview of the Bible—to see the contents of the Bible the way ancient Israelites and Christians would have seen it. That's easier said than done, to be sure, but unless you're doing it, you cannot understand what's going on in most of the Bible, and you have little hope of seeing how the grand plotline hangs together. You may not realize it now, but if it's weird, it's important. What may feel like filler isn't. There are no throwaway passages. You just can't see them for what they are—since you aren't an ancient Israelite or an early Jewish Christian who lived two millennia ago. You need a new set of eyes.

An important step toward recovering a "re-mythologized" narrative of the Bible is accepting the premise that the spiritual world, the world we do not see with our earthly eyes, is the *real* world. It is the world of our everyday existence that is secondary or peripheral. Put in popular terms, we need to escape the matrix—the notion that the "here and now" is the litmus test of reality.

But we fear to consider life in those terms. We are afraid to believe that we are at the center of a death match among beings of unimaginable power. And yet this is precisely what the Bible describes in detail—in *both* testaments. Tragically, much of this material has been obscured by camouflaged translation and the fear of uncomfortable answers to "strange" passages. The sad reality is that much of what is put forth as Christian doctrine nowadays is done so without regard to the context of the ancient people who first heard it, felt it, believed it, and saw it. The point isn't that Christian doctrine is wrong; it's that it has lost something in terms of the richness and fascination it had to those who lived long ago.

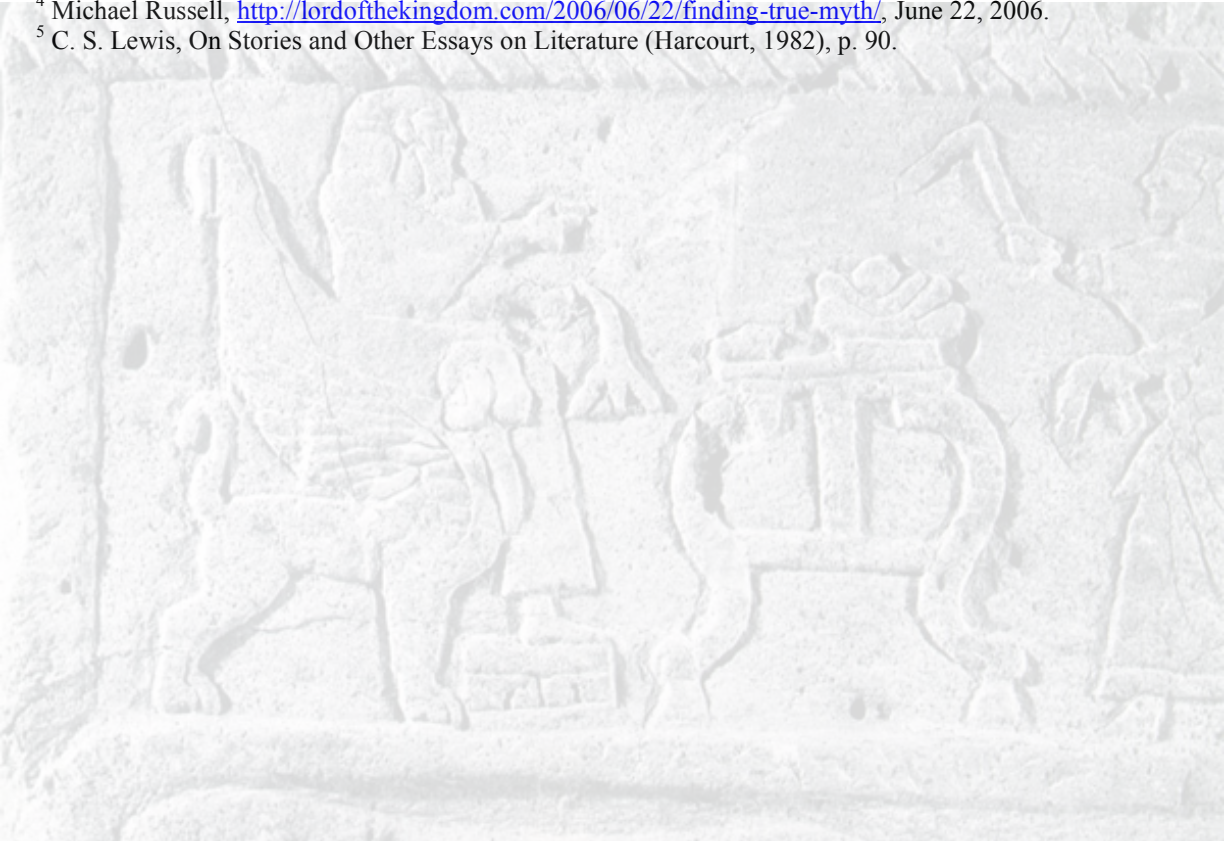
Think of this book as my offer to drive you home to the faith. I'm a believer like you are, so you're probably sure I can get you there in one piece. But I know something you don't—you've never taken the way I'll be going. Once you're in my car, since I don't want your trip to be dull, I start drawing your attention to points of interest along the way. That's when you start to feel a little uncertain. It doesn't take you long to realize that nothing looks as it should. You begin to wonder if I know the way to the right house, since the signposts you've

come to expect just don't look the same. Don't worry. You may not be able to retrace I'm taking you, but you'll arrive safe and sound.

What I offer in this book may seem radical, but it is nothing less than the worldview of the ancient Israelite and the first century Jew. The ancients believed in the existence of a unique, supreme God, as well as a vast, cosmic, unseen world populated with other gods, angels, and evil beings of various origins, ranks, and tasks. These are the characters in an enduring, titanic struggle for the souls of humankind and the destiny of earth. Our Bible is a witness to this winner-take-all war. It's the stuff of which epic myths are made. But in this case, *it's the myth that is true*.

⁴ Michael Russell, <http://lordofthekingdom.com/2006/06/22/finding-true-myth/>, June 22, 2006.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (Harcourt, 1982), p. 90.



Chapter 1

Muzzling the Dragon

I'm betting it feels strange to start off this way. You're likely wondering why I'd begin with Satan. Actually, I'm not. I know Satan is called the dragon in the book of Revelation, but he isn't the point. I'm talking about the sea monster God defeated when he created the heavens and the earth.

Really.

I know. No sooner did I get you in the car than you're sure we're lost. We're not. But I did warn you about the trip.

The Chaos Monster of Psalm 74

Genesis 1 is not the only account of creation in the Bible. That's probably a surprise since Genesis 1 the familiar go-to passage for the origin of the world. The other creation account I have in mind is one you've likely read before but didn't realize what it was saying. In that passage, Psalm 74, creation happens after God subdues a tremendous monster.

For the sake of orientation, I've underlined the creation language you'd recognize from Genesis to highlight the creation description, as well as verse references for that language from Genesis 1:

- 12 Yet God my King is from of old,
working salvation in the midst of the earth.
- 13 You divided the sea (Gen 1:6-7) by your might;
you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.
- 14 You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
- 15 You split open springs and brooks;
you dried up ever-flowing streams.
- 16 Yours is the day, yours also the night (Gen 1:4-5);
you have established the heavenly lights and the sun (Gen 1:14-18).
- 17 You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth (Gen 1:9-10);
you have made summer and winter (Gen 1:14).

The language has obvious references to creation. But look at what I didn't underline. Right in the middle of God's ordering the sea and dry land, establishing the sun, moon, and stars and the seasons they mark, we read that God "broke the heads of the sea

monsters” and “crushed the heads of Leviathan.” What in the world (couldn’t resist the pun) is going on?

An ancient Israelite would have no trouble deciphering the messaging in Psalm 74. In the literature of ancient Mesopotamia and Canaan (particularly from Ugarit, a city state in ancient Syria), neighboring regions with which the Israelites had frequent contact, these symbolic images were very familiar.

One of the most famous stories that has survived on ancient tablets discovered at Ugarit is the story of how Baal became king of the gods. This story is the backdrop for Psalm 74. The epic tale describes how Baal battles against *Yamm* (as with biblical Hebrew, the word means “sea”). *Yamm* was a chaotic, violent force, often depicted as a great dragon-like sea monster. In the guise of this sea beast, *Yamm* was also referred to by the names *Tannun* or *Litanu*. Baal defeated the raging sea and the sea monster, earning “everlasting dominion” over the gods. The moral of the Ugaritic story is that the high king of the gods (Baal) has power over the unpredictable forces of nature.

The same story of a battle between a great god seeking kingship and a terrible sea monster is known from Mesopotamia (specifically, Babylon). In this epic, called *Enuma Elish*, the deadly conflict is directly linked to creation. In *Enuma Elish*, heaven and earth were created after two gods fought to the death over supremacy in the pantheon. Without a clear leader, the cosmos faced anarchy and disorder. Order had to be established, and so a conflict for kingship ensued. The loser of the battle was a great sea dragon named *Tiamat*. The winner, the high god Marduk, cut *Tiamat*’s body in half and made heaven and earth with the two pieces. The dragon was dead, Marduk brought order to the cosmos, and heaven and earth were created.

Psalm 74 has close parallels to both these epics. In the Ugaritic story about Baal, the italicized Ugaritic terms are precise equivalents to some Hebrew words in Psalm 74:13-14. Those verses read: “You divided the sea (*yam* = *Yamm*) by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters (*tanninim* = *Tannun*) on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan (= *Litanu*).” Other passages in the Old Testament refer to Leviathan using descriptions found in Ugaritic tablets. In some Ugaritic stories *Litanu* is described as a “twisting serpent” and “fleeing serpent.” Those exact phrases are used of Leviathan in Isa 27:1 and Job 26:13.

Notice in Psa 74:13 that the sea (*yam*) is “divided” or split—just as the monster of the deep in the Babylonian story was cut in half. In Genesis the waters were divided in two by a great “expanse” or “firmament” created by God. Half the waters were stationed above the firmament (which as the sky) and half stayed below on the earth. In Genesis these waters that were split were “the deep” (Gen 1:2), *tehom* in Hebrew. The word *tehom* is very similar to Babylonian *Tiamat*—so similar that many scholars of the last century believed the Genesis description was borrowed from the Babylonians. Few scholars accept that notion today in the wake of the discovery of the literature of Ugarit. Hebrew *tehom* is actually identical to the primeval sea waters of Ugaritic epics (called *taham*).

Psalm 74 and Genesis 1 therefore have conceptual connections to the material from Babylon and Ugarit, though 74 is much more vivid in revealing those connections.

Understanding the Ancient Imagery

God didn't really fight a literal dragon at the beginning of creation and use parts of it to build heaven and earth. Rather, these are images that convey important ideas. The people of the biblical world knew nothing of physical science, and the biblical writers provide no coherent scientific process for the creation. They merely assert who was responsible (Yahweh) and describe his acts with imagery familiar to all at the time. They did so deliberately and for good reasons.

The biblical writers drew on the mythological epics of Ugarit and Babylon to provide their own answers to two theological questions: Who is king of the gods? and Who controls the forces of nature? The answer to both questions was Yahweh, the God of Israel. Using ancient Near Eastern mythological imagery was logical since the imagery was familiar throughout the known world. Inserting Yahweh into these scenes made the theological message unmistakable to both Jew and Gentile; it would not be missed by anyone in the ancient Near East.

Answering both of these questions in the context of creation also gave ancient Israelite readers the timeline for both lessons: from the very beginning, Yahweh was king of all gods, and it was Yahweh who created the world in the first place, subduing untamed nature to bring about an orderly world for human habitation.

That these lessons were theologically crucial is apparent from the fact that all ancient civilizations have stories that provide answers to these questions. People all over the world in antiquity wanted to know who was in charge of the divine realm and the forces of nature as they experienced them. The people of antiquity had an intuition that the ordered world in which they lived wasn't always that way. It came from somewhere, and was ordered by someone other than themselves. They knew the gods were around before the heavens and earth, so that made them the logical candidates for creating the world they experienced. And since natural disasters (flood, drought, famine, fire, etc.) happened all the time, the ancients suspected that at least some of them were behind these disasters. That in turn meant some of the gods liked humans while others did not. The gods weren't exactly one big happy family.

All this boils down to the fact that there was a pressing need to know who was in charge. Life was chaotic and unpredictable, especially in the ancient world, where one's survival was a daily problem to be solved. There was conflict in the divine realm, which made life even more uncertain. It is for this reason the Old Testament uses what scholars now call "chaos imagery" in presenting Yahweh as creator and king. Yahweh was the one who brought about the heavens and earth, holding back the forces of nature from unrestrained violence against humanity. Yahweh frequently appears in a whirlwind with fire, lightning, and tempest, thereby identifying him as the source and controller of all these

forces (Job 22:14; 38:1; Psa 97:2; 104:3; Nah 1:3). He is Lord of the hosts of heaven, king of all gods (Deut 10:17; Psa 86:8; 95:3; 96:4; 136:2; 2 Chron 2:5).

Comprehending Chaos: The Natural Realm

It is important to take the discussion of the idea of chaos a bit further, as it has a role to play in the biblical epic. In creation accounts, chaos refers to the forces of creation—*as created*. The forces of nature, chaotic as they are, are not morally evil, as creation is not a moral, personal entity. When these forces break forth, they can and do cause disaster and human misery, but they have no mind to *intend* as much. While this is the case, the forces of nature were created as a reflection of their Creator, but subservient to the Creator's will. Nature is untamed, unpredictable, and uncontrollable power. It is a picture of the Creator God. Paul of course understood this idea—that observing nature could teach us about the attributes of God (Rom 1:18-20). The creation stories tell us that the chaotic forces of nature needed to be restrained by the Creator, their only Master, to make the world habitable for humanity, and so they were.

We know from the biblical text that the above is true primarily because of Genesis 1:2 and 1:31. In Gen 1:2 we read that when God began creating the heavens and the earth, “the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep (*tehom*).” *Tehom*, the primeval waters of chaos, is pictured as subdued and passive, already conquered, for there is no battle scene in Genesis 1, unlike Psalm 74. The two are not in contradiction. They merely describe two points in God's activity to bring about the heavens and the earth. Some view Gen 1:2 as sinister or as speaking of divine judgment, mainly because of the reference to darkness, but this is not coherent. The forces of nature are not evil or the Devil, the latter of which is described as a personal spiritual entity in the Bible. Other passages clearly associate God with the darkness with no hint of punishment, and so darkness in and of itself does not denote evil and judgment (Exod 20:21; Deut 5:22; 1 Kings 8:12; 2 Chron 6:1). Darkness was merely one of the conditions present before God ordered the creation (Job 38:9). It is likely associated with God's dwelling since God was perceived as living above the sky, which was dark at night (Psa 18:8-11).

The point is straightforward: chaos—unpredictability, untamed nature—was part of God's original creation. Genesis 1 goes on to describe how God ordered the world and filled it, and when we get to Gen 1:31, the end of God's work, we read that God deemed the results “very good.” There is no reference to the chaotic forces of nature being eliminated or completely tamed; they are rather held back and brought under the Creator's greater power, his restraint. They behave as they were created to behave, but are not allowed full release, which would make human habitation impossible.

We can know more clearly that this description is on target from other considerations in the biblical text.

First, there was only one place on earth where nature was completely tamed and no threat at all to humans: Eden. Many Bible readers think of the entire original earth as Eden, but

that is not what the Scripture says. Eden was only a tiny plot on the earth. It is given very specific geographical markers (Gen 2:8-14) on earth. The original planet earth prior to the Fall of humanity was not Eden. Eden was in fact a deliberate *contrast* to the rest of the planet. It was at peace without any threat of the chaotic forces of nature breaking forth because it alone was where God was; it was his earthly abode. The rest of creation was “very good,” but it was not Eden. This also shows us that the declaration that God saw his work as “very good” did not mean he saw it as perfect. Perfection was Eden, a small part of the planet, not the entire planet. Perfection required the presence of God, which was true only in Eden, the place where God had come to earth.⁶

Second, we know the preceding description of creation is accurate since the curses that resulted from the Fall are never said to involve natural disaster. It is commonly assumed that the natural disasters humans have experienced from time immemorial extend from human sin at the Fall. Frankly, that’s thinking too highly of ourselves as sinners. The curses meted out in the wake of the Fall have nothing to do with natural disaster. A close reading of Gen 3:16-19 shows that the curses that effect humankind are very focused: Adam and Eve lose immortality, food production becomes toilsome, and Eve’s pain in childbirth would be acute.⁷ The “ground” is not cursed so that it will hereafter produce natural disasters. The text never says this and does not need to, since natural forces that cause those sorts of things were allowed to remain in the fabric of creation (Gen 1:2), albeit under restraint.

Isaiah 45:7, a verse that occurs in a passage parallel to Gen 1:2, adds support for this point: “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.” Along with light and darkness, the text is clear that calamity was part of the original creation. These three conditions were subsequently ordered or managed by God in Genesis 1—woven into the ordered creation as God wished, but not eliminated. What happened in Eden did not cause the creation to behave unpredictably; it resulted in perfection being lost.

Third, we can be sure that chaos part of creation since all creation will only become Edenic in the distant future, what scholars call the *eschaton*, the “end time.” Some scholars would argue that the chaos monster (Leviathan or tehom) was killed and so the idea of chaos being an inherent part of creation is wrong. This approach over-literalizes the imagery. Just as we would not believe that heaven and earth were made from the body parts of a cosmic sea monster, so there is no need to believe a real cosmic monster was killed. The language is that of conquest and kingship, which are the teaching points of the symbolic images. Besides, if the monster was “really” killed, why would Isaiah clearly say that only at the last day will Leviathan meet his true end?

In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong word will punish
Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the
dragon that is in the sea. (Isa 27:1)

The book of Revelation, taking its cue from Isa 27:1, agrees. The actual elimination of the unpredictable wildness of the created world will only come with the final reign of

God on earth—when all the earth is Eden. Only when the new heaven and new earth is brought into being will there be “no more *sea*” (Rev 21:1). That is where the cosmic epic we call the Bible ultimately takes us, but we’re still at the beginning! There’s a lot of ground to cover before we get to the climax.

Implications

Why would God create this way? Why allow some element of unpredictability in creation, as opposed to making the whole earth Eden? Doesn’t this put humanity at risk of harm?

I’ve already hinted at part of the answer to these questions. Nature was designed to reflect the character and power of God. He is pure, untamed power. A creation with chaotic forces reflects images God. But God is also good, and so he restrains for humankind’s benefit. But still further, God is also other than creation and humankind. This is where Eden comes in. God desired a place on his earth where humankind could learn that only in the presence of God was there perfection and unthreatened eternal life. Only in Eden was creation in perfect harmony with God and his creatures. Eden was a contrast to the rest of the planet by design. Adam and Eve of course did not discover life outside Eden until they sinned, but they could experience God’s fullest intention for life on earth. The only way it could be lost was if they rejected it, which they eventually did.

This original arrangement was therefore not a threat to humanity. Life on earth only became uncertain in the wake of human rebellion, not in God’s design. Only after being thrust out of Eden was humanity at risk from nature, no longer under the protection of the divine environment. The world Adam and Eve found after was as God had designed it—fully capable of sustaining human life, though now with great toil and risk. Only after the Fall was immortality (though even in Eden dependent on God) lost and the appearance of death inevitable.

For readers of the Bible long after Adam and Eve, the creation narratives are designed to make us long for life with God—to long for the *eschaton*, when all the earth is Eden anew, when God returns to earth as its immediate, present ruler. This restoration of Eden is the ultimate storyline of the Bible, but it is one that involves many subplots that we will encounter in this book: rebellion, faithlessness, spiritual powers of darkness that seek both human destruction and Yahweh’s humiliation, divine abandonment, and Yahweh’s masterful strategy—overt and covert—to remedy the tragic consequences of evil and human sin. In our earthly existence natural disasters happen not because God indiscriminately targets people with them, nor because he needs them included for some larger plan to work, but because earth is not Eden.⁸ Creation is behaving as it was designed to behave, but humans now suffer the consequences of being divorced from God’s abode in Eden. God’s original intention was rejected by humankind.

Despite the unpredictability that is part of our non-Edenic world, the forces of nature are still actually restrained. The natural world could be much worse than it is. In fact this is the point of much of the Bible’s apocalyptic material—that as the final day of judgment

(followed by the restoration of Eden) approaches, natural disasters, including ominous celestial signs and events, will increase in number and intensity (Matt 24:7; Luke 21:11; Rev 15:1). Chaos is unleashed as punishment on a wicked world, much in the manner of the flood, to prepare for something new. This is why the pain of childbirth is used to describe the time of the end in the Bible: horrible pain followed by new birth (Matt 24:8; Rom 8:22).

While the Fall was not the origin of suffering due to natural forces, it is nevertheless associated with that suffering since one of its results was that humankind now found itself at the mercy of a world where catastrophe could happen. Another of its results was the proliferation of human evil. These two problems are the fundamental causes of human misery and death. God decided not to eliminate the wildness of nature, leaving it unpredictable but restrained. He also decided not to eliminate humans when they sinned, or to step in and eradicate their ability to sin again, opting instead to expel them from Eden. This is why people—believer and unbeliever, righteous or not—suffer in life.

In Chapter 5 I'll discuss how God's decision to create humans free (and to leave them that way after the fall) follows the same rationale for why he decided to create a world that wasn't Eden. Both are an extension and reflection of his attributes. The decision of creation was morally good since it instilled a longing for paradise—God's perfect presence in the world—in the human heart. That good longing becomes corrupted in various episodes in the biblical story. Likewise God's decision to make humans free was ultimately required by God's character and nature, and it too was good, though costly, to both humanity and God himself. For now, however, we need to keep setting the stage for humanity's entrance into the world—and there are a lot of characters to meet before we get to that moment!

⁶ This distinction is important for other theological reasons. It provides a strong point of refutation against monism ("all is one") and pantheism ("the creation is God"). If the entire earth was perfect, but perfection requires the presence of God, a monist or pantheist could use this notion in defense of their belief systems. Distinguishing Eden from the entire earth prevents this argument.

⁷ The language in Genesis 3:16 speaks of "multiplying" pain in childbirth, not that childbirth would now become painful. This suggests there would have been pain in childbirth even in Eden. This is logical given what has to happen anatomically at the birth of a child. There is no indication in Genesis that Eve was more human than human.

⁸ Some readers may presume that if God knows natural disasters will happen, he must in some way ordain them. The Scriptures actually disconnect foreknowledge and predestination without denying either. God can and, as Scripture notes in several places, does predestinate events, but events as they occur do not need to be predestinated because God knows them. See Chapter 6.

Chapter 2

God's Heavenly Household

Children often ask, “What was there before God made the world?” I’m guessing the answer most adults would give is “God”—but that actually isn’t completely correct. The more precise answer is that God and his heavenly host were around before God created the world as we know it. We’ll see a passage in a moment from Job where that’s made clear.

Most discussions of “What was before creation” omit the members of the heavenly host. As I look back on my own education, that omission isn’t surprising. The biblical theology of divine beings in God’s unseen bureaucracy receives scant attention in most theology textbooks, and most of what is written is superficially derived from the English Bible. The subject just hasn’t been assigned much importance. That’s unfortunate because it is absolutely crucial.

I believe that an accurate understanding of the relationship of God to these other beings is the key to understanding biblical theology. God and his heavenly household are the centerpiece of the mythic narrative that has been obscured by time and culture. In the Preface to this book I made the point that the church needs to re-contextualize its theology in terms of ancient Israelite religion to really understand what’s going on in the Bible. Consider this chapter Exhibit A in defense of that assertion. Read prayerfully and closely, because you’ll never look at your Bible the same way again.

Introducing the Elohim

We’ll start our introduction with the obscure but important passage I referred to in the last chapter, Job 38:4-7. In the section of the book of Job where these verses are found, God is challenging Job, who wanted to know why he was suffering. God’s general answer in Job 38-42 is that he doesn’t need to explain himself because he’s God. Part of that response reads:

⁴Where were you [Job] when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Speak if you have understanding!

⁵Who fixed its dimensions? Surely you know!

Or who measured it with a line?

⁶On what were its bases sunk?

Who set its cornerstone,

⁷When the morning stars sang together

And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

There's a lot to be said about this passage. First, you probably noticed that God is basically asking Job (sarcastically) where Job was when He created the earth. God refers to the time when he laid earth's "foundations," fixed and measured its "dimensions," sank its "bases," and set its "cornerstone." Second, you also no doubt noticed the underlined portion. We learn from this text that, at the very moment of earth's creation, there were *already* a number of "sons of God." These sons of God shouted for joy when they saw God's creative power and handiwork. You might be thinking the sons of God are the angels. That's a common assumption, but it's not quite correct since the Hebrew word for angels (*mal'akim*) is completely different than the Hebrew words behind "sons of God." Third, you may have discerned via the underlining that the two lines of verse 7 parallel each other. That is, the sons of God who shout for joy are also identified as "morning stars" who "sang together." Such parallelism is the major feature of Hebrew poetry: one line renames or repeats another. I won't lapse into a lecture on Hebrew poetry—just make a mental note of the parallel, that the sons of God are identified with the heavenly starry host.

The passage raises some questions. Maybe you're wondering if we can be sure that God's description really does refer to the creation of the earth. I'm going to keep my promise to save all the data that proves this for an appendix.⁹ By way of just one proof for now, though, you should know that the Hebrew words in Job for "laying the foundations" are the same words as used in other verses that undoubtedly refer back to the creation of the earth (see Psalm 102:25 [Hebrew, 26]; 104:5; Prov. 8:29; Isa. 48:13; 51:13, 16). One verse in that list should jump out at you right away—Proverbs 8:29. That's the passage we read in Chapter One, where Wisdom claimed to be at God's side serving as his assistant in creation! This is clear biblical testimony that the sons of God who watched the show were watching God *and* his co-creator in action. They were all there—*before there were human beings*.

Why would I emphasize that last line when it's so painfully obvious? Because many Christian pastors and professors teach that the phrase "sons of God" refers to humans! Granted, they usually do not make that mistake in this passage—the supernatural character of the sons of God is irrefutable in Job 38 since humans were not yet created. However, in other passages, it is argued by many that "sons of God" refers to human beings. The reason for this misguided conclusion requires a bit of background.

In the original Hebrew, the phrase "sons of God" in Job 38:7 is *beney elohim*.¹⁰ You might recognize *elohim* as one of God's names. In fact, it is the most common name for Israel's God, despite the fact that its "shape" or spelling is *plural*. (Yes, you read correctly—*plural*). Hebrew actually has two generic words for "God" (or any other foreign "god"): the more common is *el*; the other is *eloah*. In English we normally make words plural by adding "-s" or "-es" to words ("rats"; "horses"). In Hebrew, plurals of masculine nouns end with "-im" (and God is always described with masculine pronouns in the Bible – "he"; "him"). The word *elohim* is the plural of *eloah*; the plural of *el* is *elim*.

The above discussion means that the word *elohim* all by itself can refer to either “God” (capitalized, the God of Israel) or “gods” (lower case, other divine beings). We have to wait for the word to be put into a sentence to know which meaning is the focus. We have words like this in English. For example, the word “sheep” can be either singular or plural. By itself we cannot tell which option is correct. If we put “sheep” into the sentence, “The sheep is lost,” we know only one sheep is meant since the verb “is” requires its subject to be singular. Likewise, “the sheep are lost” informs us that more than one sheep is in view.

Over two thousand occurrences of the word *elohim* in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament point to the singular God of Israel. We know this because of the grammar of the sentences in which the word occurs, as well as context. Job 38:4 obviously refers to the God of Israel since the grammar there has the creator speaking in the first person singular (“I laid the foundations of the earth”). At other times, God is referred to as *ha-elohim*, with the Hebrew definite article (the word for “the”) in front of *elohim*. It was written this way to signal that the God of Israel was “THE God” (par excellence) among all other gods. The grammar and context of any particular occurrence helps the reader make the decision about what to do with *elohim*.

It shouldn’t be surprising that since God can be referred to as *elohim* and *ha-elohim* the Hebrew Old Testament attaches the phrase “the sons of” to both forms of God’s name. At times the Hebrew text refers to the sons of God as *beney elohim* and at other times as *beney ha-elohim*. There is no difference in meaning. In the same manner, the Hebrew text occasionally reads *beney elim*—with the meaning “sons of God” (though plural in shape, *elim* refers to the singular God in that phrase, just like *elohim* does).¹¹ One verse (see Psalm 82:6 below) uses the phrase *beney elyon* (“sons of the Most High”), since *elyon* is yet another name for God.

The thought might have occurred to you that when the Hebrew writers referred to the God of Israel as “THE God” (par excellence) or “Most High” (greater and more exalted than all others) that this implies more than one god. If that question crept into your mind, kudos to you! You’d be *correct*—and that brings us to the reason why so many evangelical scholars and pastors want the “sons of God” to be human beings in certain passages. They think having heavenly sons of God in certain passages puts polytheism in the Bible.

This uneasiness is felt especially acutely in Psalm 82, *since Psalm 82:1 and 82:6 identify the sons of God as plural elohim—gods*. But that is the literal and most straightforward understanding of the text. What opponents of the obvious meaning of the text miss is that the presence of more than one god in the Bible does *not* mean polytheism as we commonly use that word. If these last two sentences sound way out, stay with me. Let’s take a look at Psalm 82 (note my insertion of Hebrew and grammatical terms and the underlining):

A psalm of Asaph.

- ¹ God (*elohim*) stands in the divine council (literally, *council of El*);
among the gods (*elohim*) He pronounces judgment.
- ² How long will you (plural) judge unjustly,
showing favor to the wicked? *Selah*.
- ³ Judge the wretched and the orphan,
vindicate the lowly and the poor,
⁴ rescue the wretched and the needy;
save them from the hand of the wicked.
- ⁵ They neither know nor understand,
they go about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth totter.
- ⁶ I said, "you (plural) gods (*elohim*),
sons of the Most High (beney Elyon), all of you (plural);
⁷but you (plural) shall die as men do,
fall like any prince.
- ⁸ Arise (the command is singular), O God (*elohim*),
judge (the command is singular) the earth,
for you (singular) shall inherit all the nations.

Despite the fact that it makes people uncomfortable, the text means what it says.¹² In Psalm 82:1, the first *elohim* must be singular, since the Hebrew grammar has the word as the subject of a singular verb. The second *elohim* must be plural, since the preposition in front of it ("in the midst of") requires more than one. You can't be "in the *midst* of" *one* person. And according to Psalm 82:1, the singular God (*elohim*) of Israel presides over an assembly or council of other gods (*elohim*).¹³ Verse six makes it perfectly clear that these other *elohim* are the sons of the God of Israel. In that verse God himself is speaking ("I said") to the other *elohim* of that divine council, and he addresses them with the plural "you." He says point-blank: "you are gods (*elohim*), all of you." The fact that he is speaking to a group (plural *elohim*) is made certain even in the English, since God also calls them "sons of the Most High."

Some who object to the obvious meaning of the text may assert that this psalm is actually describing God the Father speaking to the other members of the Trinity. This view results in heresy here, in some very obvious ways. First, not all the members of the Trinity are "sons." The Holy Spirit is not the Son of God or a son of God. Second, if the passage has the Trinity in mind, then God is charging them with corruption! Verses 2-5 are quite clear that God is displeased with these other *elohim* in his council and has indicted them for their wicked rule. Third, this view would also have the Trinity sentenced to death! They would die like mortals ("as men do"). This can't refer to the death of Christ for three reasons: (a) the death sentence isn't restricted to just *one* son of God; (b) the death sentence is for personal guilt and corruption; (c) the Son (note the capitalization) who is God's own essence and uncreated, is superior to the other sons of God (more on that in a moment). Fourth, it is evident from the last verse that the judgment of the sons of God, these other *elohim*, has something to do with God's reclamation of the nations of the earth. The implication is that the sons of God have been ruling the earth and doing it wickedly, and so they must be removed for God's rule to

come to full fruition. In other words, they are an impediment or a nuisance (or at best a disappointment). Certainly not the way we'd want to look at the Trinity.

But what about the view that the *elohim* upon whom God has placed a death sentence are human rulers? This, too, is incoherent. Ask yourself some questions of the text. What is the scriptural basis for the idea that God presides over a council of *humans* that governs the nations of the earth? Some commentators who reject the face-value meaning of Psalm 82 like to argue that Israel's council of seventy elders is in view here—that God is judging Israel's judges or elders for their corruption. This makes little sense, since at no time in the Scriptures did Israel's elders ever have jurisdiction over all the nations of the earth. In fact, as we'll see in the next chapter, the situation is exactly opposite—Israel was *separated* from the nations to be God's own possession and focus of his rule.

Moreover, since when do the corrupt decisions of a group of humans make the foundations of the earth totter (v. 5)? Lastly, if these *elohim* are humans, why are they sentenced to die “like humans”? This is nonsensical, and is defeated by the grammar and structure of the Hebrew text.¹⁴ It would be akin to sentencing a child to grow up, or a dog to bark, or a human being to breathe. The point of verse 6 is that, in response to the corruption of the *elohim*, they will be stripped of their immortality at God's discretion and die like humans die. A clear contrast is set up in the text.

The real problem with the human view, though, is twofold. This view cannot be reconciled with: (1) other references in the Hebrew Old Testament that refer to a divine council and other *elohim*; (2) other passages in the Hebrew Bible speak of an act of God to divide the nations of the earth among the sons of God as a punishment for their rebellion—before there was a nation of Israel. Once you understand the texts we'll examine below, Psalm 82 becomes completely coherent—and frankly brings much of the Old Testament into proper focus. For the remainder of this chapter we'll focus on the first issue: references to a heavenly council that make it clear that the council of Psalm 82 is comprised of God and other supernatural beings. We'll tackle council functions and related concepts in chapters that follow.

Yahweh and His Elohim Council

There are several other places in the Hebrew Bible that speak of plural *elohim* and a heavenly council. Perhaps the most familiar passages where the sons of God show up are the first two chapters of Job:

Job 1:1ff.

¹ There was a man in the land of Uz named Job. That man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. ²Seven sons and three daughters were born to him; ³his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred she-
asses, and a very large household. That man was wealthier than anyone in the East. ⁴It was the custom of his sons to hold feasts, each on his set day in his own home. They would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with

them.⁵ When a round of feast days was over, Job would send word to them to sanctify themselves, and, rising early in the morning, he would make burnt offerings, one for each of them; for Job thought, “Perhaps my children have sinned and blasphemed God in their thoughts.” This is what Job always used to do.⁶ And it came to pass, when the sons of God presented themselves before the LORD, Satan came along with them.⁷ The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you been?” Satan answered the LORD, “I have been roaming all over the earth.”⁸ The LORD said to Satan, “Have you noticed My servant Job? There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil!”

Job 2:1ff.

¹ Once again the sons of God presented themselves before the LORD. Satan came along with them to present himself before the LORD.² The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you been?” Satan answered the LORD, “I have been roaming all over the earth.”³ The LORD said to Satan, “Have you noticed My servant Job? There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil. He still keeps his integrity; so you have incited Me against him to destroy him for no good reason.”⁴ Satan answered the LORD, “Skin for skin—all that a man has he will give up for his life.⁵ But lay a hand on his bones and his flesh, and he will surely blaspheme You to Your face.”⁶ So the LORD said to Satan, “See, he is in your power; only spare his life.”

In both these passages the Hebrew phrase translated, “the sons of God” is *beney ha-elohim*. Although I have the familiar “Satan” in this passage, the Hebrew word here (*saṭan*) is best translated “The Adversary” since it has the definite article prefixed to it (*ha-saṭan*) Hebrew does not prefix proper names with the article, and neither does English (I am not “*the* Mike”). In the Intertestamental period and the New Testament era, *saṭan* became a proper name for God’s arch enemy. The word as used here actually refers to a being who exercises a prosecutorial function—one who accuses or indicts another person. In the ancient Near East, to which the Old Testament culturally belongs, this was a specific role within the divine council (see Zechariah 3:1-7 for perhaps the classic passage on this function).

The picture here is that the divine council is meeting for business, and the Adversary has a role in that meeting. The Hebrew text is ambiguous as to whether he is a member of the council or one of the sons of God.¹⁵ He may simply be an “officer” of the council at its meetings.¹⁶ One also encounters the sons of God (*beney ha-elohim*) in Deuteronomy 32:8 (in Old Testament manuscripts from the Dead Sea Scrolls and other sources) and Genesis 6:1-4. We’ll discuss those passages in detail in other chapters as well.

Before we leave Job 1-2, take note of how the human view of the sons of God fails hopelessly in those chapters. There is simply no way that the sons of God could be human beings in Job 1-2.

One encounters the sons of God in the slightly variant spelling *beney elim* in two biblical passages. In Psalm 29:1, a verse that has suffered greatly at the hands of translators, the other *elohim* are commanded to worship Yahweh:

Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of God (*beney elim*),
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!

It is quite clear from this text that Yahweh is to be worshipped by other *elohim*, not the other way around. The God of Israel is qualitatively superior. Psalm 89:5-7 (Hebrew, vv. 6-8) echoes the same thought, and specifically references the divine council:

⁵ Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!
⁶ For who in the skies can equal the LORD,
Who can compare with the LORD among the sons of God (*beney elim*),
⁷ a God greatly dreaded in the council of the holy ones,
held in awe by all around Him?

I naturally underlined the phrase “sons of God” and obvious references to the divine council to draw your attention to their existence in the biblical text, but I also underlined “in the skies” and “all around him.” The reason is to emphasize that these sons of God are *in heaven* and *around God’s throne*. They are not a human council of judges. Once again, the human view is completely inadequate. Any “explanation” that’s offered for the sons of God and the plural *elohim* for Psalm 82 must also work in Psalm 89, and this text makes it clear that these beings and this council are in the heavens.

Perhaps the most striking scene of the divine council is found in I Kings 22. We looked at this passage in our first chapter when discussing free will. Here we have an actual divine council meeting concerning the evil king Ahab (note the underlined portions, NRSV):

¹ For three years Aram and Israel continued without war. ² But in the third year King Jehoshaphat of Judah came down to the king of Israel. ³ The king of Israel said to his servants, “Do you know that Ramoth-gilead belongs to us, yet we are doing nothing to take it out of the hand of the king of Aram?” ⁴ He said to Jehoshaphat, “Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?” Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, “I am as you are; my people are your people, my horses are your horses.”

⁵ But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, “Inquire first for the word of the LORD.” ⁶ Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred of them, and said to them, “Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?” They said, “Go up; for the LORD

will give it into the hand of the king.”⁷ But Jehoshaphat said, “Is there no other prophet of the LORD here of whom we may inquire?”⁸ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “There is still one other by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me, but only disaster.” Jehoshaphat said, “Let the king not say such a thing.”⁹ Then the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, “Bring quickly Micaiah son of Imlah.”¹⁰ Now the king of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah were sitting on their thrones, arrayed in their robes, at the threshing floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets were prophesying before them.¹¹ Zedekiah son of Chenaanah made for himself horns of iron, and he said, “Thus says the LORD: With these you shall gore the Arameans until they are destroyed.”¹² All the prophets were prophesying the same and saying, “Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.”

¹³ The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, “Look, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.”¹⁴ But Micaiah said, “As the LORD lives, whatever the LORD says to me, that I will speak.”

¹⁵ When he had come to the king, the king said to him, “Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?” He answered him, “Go up and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.”¹⁶ But the king said to him, “How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?”¹⁷ Then Micaiah said, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the LORD said, ‘These have no master; let each one go home in peace.’”¹⁸ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy anything favorable about me, but only disaster?”

¹⁹ Then Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him.”²⁰ And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ Then one said one thing, and another said another,²¹ until a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’”²² ‘How?’ the LORD asked him. He replied, ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then the LORD said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.’²³ So you see, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has decreed disaster for you.”

²⁴ Then Zedekiah son of Chenaanah came up to Micaiah, slapped him on the cheek, and said, “Which way did the spirit of the LORD pass from me to speak to you?”²⁵ Micaiah replied, “You will find out on that day when you go in to hide in an inner chamber.”²⁶ The king of Israel then ordered, “Take Micaiah, and return him to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash the king’s son,”²⁷ and say, ‘Thus says the king: Put this fellow

in prison, and feed him on reduced rations of bread and water until I come in peace.’ ”²⁸ Micaiah said, “If you return in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me.” And he said, “Hear, you peoples, all of you!”

Note from this remarkable vision of the true prophet of Yahweh that the deliberative assembly is once again in the presence of God. There is no possibility that this is a human council.

There are other references to the corrupt gods of the nations—and not idols—outside immediate divine council contexts. They affirm that other gods were part of the worldview of Israel in the Hebrew Bible. The first list below contains passages where the word *elohim* or *ha-elohim* is in the Hebrew text where you read “gods.” The second list has verses where the Hebrew word is *elim*. As I noted above, *elim* is likely still singular (“God”) when found in the phrase *beney elim*. However, when it occurs by itself, it’s plural.

The plural *elohim* / *ha-elohim*

Psalm 86:8 - Among the gods there is none like you, O Yahweh; neither [are there any works] like your works.

Psalm 95:3 - For Yahweh is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Psalm 96:4 - For Yahweh is great, and deserving of exceedingly great praise: he is to be feared above all gods.

Psalm 97:7 - All who served images were put to shame; those who boasted in mere idols; even all the gods bow down before him [Yahweh, see v. 5 preceding]

Psalm 97:9 - For you, O Yahweh, are Most High above all the earth: you are exalted far above all gods.

Psalm 135:5 - For I know that Yahweh is great, and that our lord is above all gods.

Psalm 136:2 - O give thanks to the God of gods: for his mercy endures for ever.

Psalm 138:1 - I will praise you with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise to you.

The plural *elim*

Exodus 15:11 – Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?¹⁷

Psalm 58:1 - Do you indeed decree what is right, O gods? Do you judge people fairly?¹⁸

But Are They Real—And What If They Are?

It is common for those who resist the plain meaning of the text of Psalm 82:1, 6 to argue at this point that such references to other gods are actually references to idols, or that they are figurative expressions—that Israelites didn't really believe such beings exist. The first of these is discussed in detail in Chapter Nine. For now we need only note that Moses himself says the other *elohim* are real entities, not just idols. In Deuteronomy 32, Moses is rehearsing how Israel sinned during their wilderness trek by worshipping other gods. When we get to verse 17 we read: "They sacrificed to demons, not God,¹⁹ to gods (*elohim*) they had never known, new gods (lit., new ones) that had come along recently, whom your fathers had not feared." The important observation is that the Israelites sacrificed to demons, and those demonic recipients of the sacrifices are also called gods (*elohim*). If it is argued that the other *elohim* are just idols and don't really exist, then we have to conclude demons aren't real. This is poor theology.

Those who want to argue on other grounds that these references to other gods cannot be taken as reflecting what Israelites really believed don't realize how that objection does injustice to both the biblical text and the God of Israel. What I mean here is that, if the above verses are not conveying factual information relative to biblical theology, then God's superiority is a mockery. For example, if Moses is comparing Yahweh to beings that don't exist, how is Yahweh glorified? To have Moses saying "Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the beings that aren't real" is to judge God's greatness by nothing. *We are greater* than something that doesn't exist! So is a microbe. This view unintentionally brings God down quite a few notches, to say nothing of the deception involved on Moses' part—and even God's since he inspired the words. Saying "among the beings that we all know don't exist there is none like Yahweh" is tantamount to comparing Yahweh with Mickey Mouse, Spiderman, or some fictional literary figure. This reduces praise to a snicker. It also makes the writer somewhat mentally unbalanced. He sings Yahweh's praise before beings he really believes aren't there? He commands the same imaginary beings to worship Yahweh (Psa. 29:1)? Worse yet, Yahweh presides over a council of beings that don't exist? Why would the Holy Spirit inspire such nonsense?

More substantive is the fact that those who don't want to take the text for what it says in such verses fear that they might be affirming polytheism as part of the belief system of the biblical writers. I'm sympathetic to this concern, since I felt that way the first time I saw this after my decision to let the text be my teacher. It was difficult for me to understand that some cherished notions about the word G-O-D were actually misconceptions. Because I thought G-O-D was exclusively the name of a personal being, namely Yahweh of Israel, I tended to assign the attributes of the God of Israel, to the word spelled G-O-D. When I came to realize that there were other G-O-D-S in a heavenly council, it *seemed* (and that's an important word) as though Yahweh was just

one among equals. That sounded like polytheism, and that bothered me. The answers to my concerns, though, were readily available.

The first thing I had to do was to see if a term like polytheism (or some other term besides monotheism) really fit what it was Israel believed about Yahweh. Polytheistic religions typically have a group of gods who fight and scheme against one another for power, and sometimes leadership of the lead god in charge can (and does) change in such religions. These systems also universally assume that the gods can be identified with parts of the creation, and that at least subset of the pantheon is basically equal in power and ability (or they have powers and abilities that offset the powers and abilities of the other “top tier” gods). Other terms relevant to this question are also flawed, such as *henotheism* (the belief in one superior god among other gods) and *monolatry* (the belief that you should worship only one god though others exist). These terms are deficient in that they do not sufficiently describe what the biblical writers believed. Henotheistic systems can have the lead god toppled and replaced by another god who then becomes “superior” (one wonders on what grounds, since just prior to that the god was inferior). Monolatry fails to articulate *why* one God is superior and *what criteria* make him superior—it comments only on worship.

Israel’s faith cannot be adequately understood by any of the terms above. Yahweh was not understood as on a par with other gods. In fact, while Yahweh is often called an *elohim* there are a number of instances where the Hebrew text adds the definite article (the word “the”) to *elohim*. The result is that Yahweh is *ha-elohim*—*THE elohim* (par excellence)—compared to all other *elohim*.²⁰ Yahweh is also referred to as the *elohim of elohim* (Deut. 10:17) another declaration of his superiority. These designations are significant, for if all the *elohim* were the same—just plain old *elohim*—why would Yahweh be singled out in such a way? There must be something about Yahweh that merited this elevation. To an Israelite, the differences were more than just what Yahweh did for them, as though his elevation was a popularity contest. No, there were essential, qualitative differences between Yahweh and all other *elohim*.

First, Yahweh is credited with creating all the members of the heavenly host.²¹ By definition this means he was viewed as the creator of all the other *elohim*. By definition the rest of the *elohim* are qualitatively inferior to Yahweh since they are created beings. Second, the faithful Israelite believed that the unique *elohim* who created other lesser *elohim* was sovereign over those lesser *elohim*. Third, because he was qualitatively distinct and superior, Yahweh alone deserved worship. The faithful Israelite believed Yahweh alone was the pre-existent, sovereign, omnipotent creator. To say that a divine council of plural *elohim* means polytheism requires ignoring Israel’s description of its God with respect to the other gods.

Coming to grips with how and why a godly Israelite distinguished Yahweh from the other *elohim* was only part of what helped me deal with the shock of what the biblical text actually said about Yahweh and the divine council. Knowing that it didn’t mean polytheism as we understand that term was one thing; knowing what it did mean was another. If the word *elohim* itself wasn’t to be exclusively equated with Yahweh, what

did it mean? With all these *elohim* running around in the Old Testament, the ancient Israelite must have understood something about the term.

I came to discover that the Old Testament actually calls a number of beings or entities *elohim*. Yahweh, of course is called an *elohim*, as are Yahweh's sons, the sons of the Most High in Psalm 82:6. You also may recall that Deut 32:17, a verse we looked at not too long ago, refers to demons (*shedim*) as *elohim*. Angels may also be called *elohim*, assuming there is a connection between Genesis 35:7 and Genesis 32:1-2. In Gen. 35:7, the word "God" (in all English translations) is *elohim*, but it is accompanied by a plural verb form, which may mean we are to translate the word "gods." Genesis 35:7 has Jacob saying "the gods" appeared to him when he was fleeing from his brother Esau. It seems certain that this is a reference back to Gen. 32:1-2, when "the angels of God" appeared to Jacob at that precise time. That would mean the "angels of God" of Gen 32:1-2 are called *elohim* in Gen 35:7. Lastly, the spirits of human dead are called *elohim* in 1 Sam 28:13. In that passage the witch of Endor is ordered by Saul to contact the dead Samuel. She obeys and when she says, "I see an *elohim* coming up out of the earth," both she and Saul identify that *elohim* as the deceased Samuel.

What are we to make of this? It makes no sense to have Yahweh, the sons of God, demons, angels, and the spirits of dead humans all interchangeable with respect to their attributes! No Israelite would have thought the disembodied human dead had the same attributes as Yahweh, or an angel. This conundrum actually reinforces what we saw above—that the term *elohim* itself does not refer to a set of attributes possessed by the God of Israel. E-L-O-H-I-M as a word does not refer to a being that is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, etc. It cannot, since beings far below the God of Israel in terms of attributes are identified with the same word.

The solution is that *elohim* refers to *an inhabitant of a certain plane of existence—that plane or reality we normally refer to as the "spiritual world."* All of the beings that are called *elohim* have as their proper habitation the spiritual world. The inhabitants of that plane of reality are "by nature" disembodied. They may take on flesh and "cross over" to the other plane of reality (our world), where beings are by nature embodied, but that is not their normative state. This is why the human dead are also on that plane of reality. As we will explore in succeeding chapters, terms like "angel" and "demon" actually describe functions within the spiritual world. In effect, they are job descriptions held by certain *elohim*. For our purposes now, among the *elohim*, only one *elohim* is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and so on—Yahweh. Yahweh is an *elohim*, but no other *elohim* are Yahweh. He is "species unique." There is only one. This was Israel's faith, and it is our faith. We need not be afraid of what the text says.

What About Jesus, the "Only Begotten" Son of God?

There was one final issue that I had to process once I discovered that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament spoke openly of many *elohim* sons of God: what about Jesus as the "only begotten" son of God? For some reason, it had never struck me that, while the New Testament apparently referred to Jesus in such terms, the Old Testament had a number of

verses that referred to plural sons of God. How could Jesus be the “only” one when there were others?

“Only begotten” is an unfortunately confusing translation, especially for modern readers. The Greek word from which this translation has derived is *monogenes*. Not only does the translation “only begotten” seem to contradict the obvious statements in the Old Testament about other sons of God, it sounds as though there was a time when the Son did not exist—that he had a beginning.

The Greek word *monogenes* actually doesn’t mean “only begotten.” The confusion extends from an old misunderstanding of the root of the Greek word. For many years *monogenes* was thought to have derived from two Greek terms, *monos* (“only”) and *gennao* (“to beget, bear”). Scholars of Greek linguistics have discovered, though, that the second part of the word *monogenes* does not come from the Greek verb *gennao*, but rather the noun *genos* (“class, kind”). The term literally means “one of a kind” or “unique” with no connotation of time or origin or solitary existence. The validity of this understanding is borne out by the New Testament itself. In Hebrews 11:17, Isaac is called Abraham’s *monogenes*—but it is crystal clear from the Old Testament that Isaac was *not* the only son Abraham had begotten, since he had also fathered Ishmael prior to Isaac. The term must mean that Isaac was Abraham’s *unique* son, for he was the son of the covenant promises and the line through which Messiah would come. Just as Yahweh is an *elohim*, and no other *elohim* are Yahweh, so Jesus is the unique Son, and no other sons of God are like Him.

As we’ll see in other chapters, this is a sort of backdoor approach to Jesus being of the same unique essence as the Father. Nothing is doctrinally lost—but our understanding of the unique Son is much sharper, and rooted in the Hebrew Old Testament of all places! But while the divine council doesn’t conflict with the Christian idea of a godhead, is the notion of a godhead found in the Old Testament? I’m guessing you can anticipate my answer.

⁹ See www.themyththatistrue.com for a full discussion.

¹⁰ I am using only English letters to “spell” this Hebrew term rather than strictly proper transliteration for reasons of convenience for English readers.

¹¹ See www.themyththatistrue.com for how *elim* in this phrase still points to a singular being. However, *elim* by itself and not following “sons of” (Hebrew, *beney*) can only mean plural “gods” (cf. Job 41:17).

¹² See www.themyththatistrue.com for a detailed analysis of the Hebrew grammar and syntax of Psalm 82.

¹³ What follows in this chapter is a basic introduction to the divine council. Aside from the Appendixes related to this chapter, for more information on the divine council see E. Theodore Mullen, “Divine Assembly,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol.2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 214-217; S. B. Parker, “Council (Sod),” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 1999); and Michael S. Heiser, “Divine Council,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Intervarsity Press, forthcoming).

¹⁴ See www.themyththatistrue.com.

¹⁵ The questions are difficult to answer given the paucity of the biblical material relevant to the discussion. See www.themyththatistrue.com.

¹⁶ We will discuss Satan in more detail in other chapters.

¹⁷ This verse requires a brief comment. All scholars and translators agree (due to the obvious context) that the Hebrew text here is *elim*. I mention this because the plural here is spelled with the normal “y” [yodh]. This note is important because of the next verse in the discussion, Psalm 58:1. Many English translations

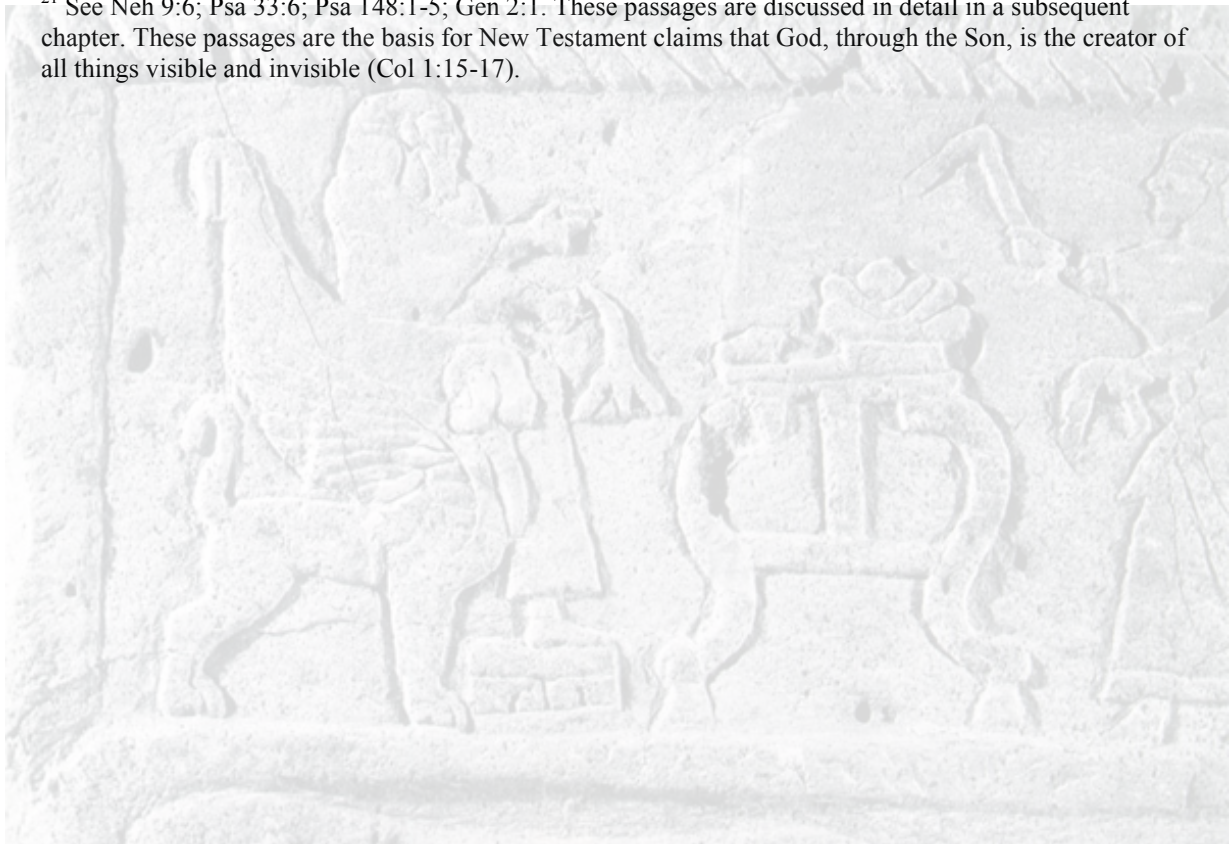
do not recognize the shortened spelling in that verse and so translations are often confusing (e.g., the word gets translated as something to do with “silence”). At other times, the reference to plural gods is deliberately obscured (e.g., NIV, “rulers”). Some of the more recent translations get Psalm 58:1 right (ESV, NRSV).

¹⁸ See the above footnote. Also note the content of this verse – that it has the gods judging humanity unjustly, just like Psalm 82. See the next chapter for the rulership of the gods / sons of God and their corruption.

¹⁹ The word for “God” here is singular: *eloah*. Some translations inaccurately read “They sacrificed to demons, no gods,” or “They sacrificed to demons that were no gods.” Both of these examples make it sound like the demons are not gods, but the text says the opposite. In fact, if this were the correct translation, it is contradicted in the next breath, since the “non gods” are again called gods: “They sacrificed to demons, no gods, *gods they did not know...*”

²⁰ Examples include Duet. 4:35, 39; Josh 22:34; 1 Kings 8:60.

²¹ See Neh 9:6; Psa 33:6; Psa 148:1-5; Gen 2:1. These passages are discussed in detail in a subsequent chapter. These passages are the basis for New Testament claims that God, through the Son, is the creator of all things visible and invisible (Col 1:15-17).



Chapter 3

God's Wisdom

We're all familiar with the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." What could be simpler? In the beginning there was only God. There was nothing else and no one else, right? Well, not quite. God wasn't actually alone at the creation.

For the Christian reader, this qualification isn't news. Christianity describes God as a Trinity—there is one God but that God is three persons. If that's your frame of reference, you affirm that God was never alone, not even before creation. In fact, Christianity goes one step further—it declares that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, who was God in human flesh, was the agent that God used to create everything. John 1:1, 14 make that idea clear: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelled with us." John 1:3 adds, "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." Paul says the same thing in 1 Cor. 8:6, "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."

In Genesis God creates by means of his word ("And God said, let there be light . . ."). It's easy for us to look at the New Testament, written centuries after Genesis, and sense that there must be some relationship between this verbal utterance spoken by God and the unusual description of Jesus in the Gospel of John as the "Word." But if that's the case, how did John make what seems to us to be quite a leap—understanding the declaration or word pronounced in Genesis not merely as a spoken utterance, but as a person, the Son. How do you read Genesis 1 and get that? How did John conceive this as a possibility and not feel he was adding something to the Old Testament?

Believe it or not, the Old Testament describes a second figure active in creation as well—we just don't find that in Genesis 1. This second figure is described in two ways. One is the subject of Chapter 9 and is best put off until that point in the unfolding story we've just begun. The other is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

The Instrument of Creation

John is actually on solid ground. Since Genesis doesn't explicitly describe two persons creating the heavens and earth, it is natural to wonder where the New Testament gets the idea that both God and the Son, Jesus, were active in the creation of everything. I use the plural "were active" since Jesus is described as the instrument God used in creation. God the Father still gets ultimate credit for creating, not the Son, but the New Testament is clear that it was by means of Jesus, God's instrument, that all things came into being.²²

The description of Jesus as the “instrument” of creation is an important one, for it provides us with a means of understanding how this description of Jesus is entirely consistent with the Old Testament. It also draws our attention to fundamental “problems” for God in his interaction with anything outside his uncreated self.

The problems I allude to are a bit hard for us to process since we are created beings. First, God is so unlike anything else—he is so completely “other” or “contrary” to everything else—that it isn’t a simple thing to describe anything he does in anything other than human terms. Second, as Jesus himself said, God is disembodied spirit (John 4:24), and so he cannot be processed, known, or understood by the things he has created—because they aren’t what he is. The biblical writers had no conception (and neither do we, frankly) of how a disembodied, non-physical entity would “make” something. God has no hands and no eyes, so he can’t fashion things in a way we could understand, and we don’t create anything by just speaking it into existence. For that reason, though the biblical writer of Genesis was led under inspiration to say that God created certain things by his “word,” other biblical writers made it a point to clarify that the “word” was actually a figure that served as God’s instrument for creating. This figure or instrument is often described in physical and even human terms—in both testaments. By making the disembodied and non-physical into something physical that our human senses could understand, God was able to solve the problem of how he could tell us what he did at the beginning. Later on, God used that same strategy for helping human beings like Abraham and Moses discern he was there—he came to them as an embodied human figure, or as something else physical they could see. We’ll look at many of these instances later. For now it is enough to realize that they all led to Jesus, the ultimate physicalization of God for humankind.

God’s Artisan

We encounter the first clear, but unexpected, description of a second figure who was active in creation in Proverbs 8:22-31. I’ve used a single underline in the passage below for the parts that identify this person as distinct from God and as participating in creation. Much of this language comes directly from Genesis 1.

- ²² “The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of old.
²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth,
²⁶ before he had made the earth with its fields,
or the first of the dust of the world.
²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there;
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit,

so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master workman,
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the children of man.

Who is this figure? We find our answer by going back to the first verse of Proverbs 8—“Does not Wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice?” Proverbs 8 has a figure called Wisdom present with God at the moment of creation, and this figure is described in *feminine* terms. Repeatedly in this passage Wisdom informs us that she existed before the creation of God’s material world. In verse 30 we discover that Wisdom was God’s “master workman.” The idea that Wisdom was God’s instrument of creation also occurs in Psalm 104:24, where we read, “How wonderful are your works, O Lord! With Wisdom you have made them all; the earth is filled with your creatures.”

If you’ve studied literature before, you know that what we’ve been looking at is something called personification—taking an abstract idea like wisdom and casting it as a person or living thing. English does this kind of thing as well. We might say, “*Greed* overtook him,” or “*Love* blinded her.” In these cases, “greed” and “love” are spoken of as though they were living things. In keeping with this personification technique, I’ve capitalized Wisdom in this discussion.

Elsewhere in Proverbs Wisdom is cast as a person. In Proverbs 1:20-33 Wisdom takes on the role of biblical prophet, warning her audience of their impending doom should they live as fools. I’ve underlined some of the words that will help illustrate the personhood of Wisdom:

²⁰ Wisdom cries aloud in the street,
in the street plazas she raises her voice;
²¹ at the head of the noisy streets she calls out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
²² “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
And those who scoff delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?”

What’s the Point?

Why does the writer of Proverbs do this? Some scholars and critics of the Bible believe that this passage is evidence of a primitive polytheism, specifically the presence of a goddess. For these scholars, the “untold story” of Israel’s faith is that Yahweh, the God of Israel, had a wife! Gods and goddesses of other ancient faiths and texts are typically depicted as creating the world and its contents through the language of sexual intercourse. However, there is nothing like this procreative language in Proverbs 8 or anywhere else in the Old Testament. To make matters even more emphatic, the Hebrew Bible doesn’t even have a word for “goddess.”²³

What about the feminine terminology then? The feminine pronouns are quite obvious (“*she* raises *her* voice”; “*she* calls out”; “*she* speaks”). Some interpreters use this as a proof that Wisdom is really a goddess figure in Israel’s religion. There’s a far more boring reason why feminine language is used of Wisdom.

If you’ve ever studied a foreign language or are bilingual, you know that languages assign gender as part of the way their grammar works. In English we have many words that we intuitively know describe males (“boy,” “man,” “actor,” “priest,” “buck,” “bull”) or females (“girl,” “woman,” “actress,” “priestess,” “doe,” “heifer”). Other words in English are ambiguous, requiring some context for what gender we’re talking about: “author,” “doctor,” “lawyer.” The English we use today doesn’t assign gender to such ambiguous words that have nothing inherently to do with physical gender. Many languages around the world, however, *must* do this because of the way their grammar works.²⁴ The reason for this derives from the way a language relates words to each other in sentences.²⁵ German, French, and Spanish are examples. The ancient biblical languages assign a gender to all nouns, not just the ones that have physical gender. It may seem odd, but the Hebrew word for “wisdom” is classified as feminine in gender in the Hebrew language. This is why when we read about the person of Wisdom in the Bible, she is described with feminine pronouns. The issue is grammatical classification, not that Wisdom has a real gender or should be thought of as a woman. The word for “law” in Hebrew—Torah—is also grammatically feminine. No one would argue that the law is female! Using grammatical gender to prop up the goddess idea just doesn’t work.

It’s far more coherent to see Wisdom as the literary expression of Israel’s anti-polytheistic belief system. While Yahweh had a divine family, his divine council, the biblical writers never endorse the idea that Yahweh had a wife. While other nations had the world being created through a sexual relationship between the chief god and goddess, the Hebrew Bible says God’s instrument for bringing all things into being was *his* Wisdom, not a goddess. The point, then, of saying that Wisdom was at God’s side as his artisan was to *deny* that the God of Israel sexually cohabited with a goddess to create everything, as the other nations conceived. God created all that is by his Word (see Chapter 9) and his attributes, such as Wisdom.

But can we be sure that Wisdom in Proverbs 8 was God’s Wisdom? Perhaps God just called out another deity or goddess to get the job done. The Hebrew Bible does not support such a notion. Other passages confirm that Wisdom is inseparable from Yahweh. Note the parallel thoughts that are underlined:

Proverbs 3

- ¹⁹ The LORD by Wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
²⁰ by his knowledge the deeps broke open,
and the clouds drop down the dew.

Jeremiah 10

- ¹⁰ But the LORD (YAHWEH) is the true God;
he is the living God and the everlasting King.

At his wrath the earth quakes,
and the nations cannot endure his indignation.

¹¹ Thus shall you say to them: “The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.”

¹² It is he who made the earth by his power,
who established the world by his Wisdom,
and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.

The language of “founding the earth,” “establishing the heavens,” and “the deeps” come from creation descriptions in Genesis and elsewhere, including Proverbs 8.²⁶ The connection between these passages and Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8 is clear. Yahweh established the world by *his* Wisdom.

Why is this important? I’ve suggested that this “second deity” figure is really a way of describing the plurality within the Trinity. That only works if the second figure shares the attributes of God. Specifically, since we’re talking about Wisdom being present before anything was created, Wisdom needs to be *uncreated*. Many interpreters would deny this on the basis of Proverbs 8:22. The translation above (ESV) reads, “The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.” Other translations have different renderings:

“The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old ...” (NIV)

“The LORD created me at the beginning of His course As the first of His works of old.”
(Jewish Tanakh)

The problem is that the Hebrew word that receives all these translations is in fact used to convey each of these meanings in various passages in the Old Testament. You may not realize it now, but there’s a lot hanging on the issue since “Wisdom language” in the Old Testament is applied to Jesus (see Chapter 21) as the agent of creation. If Jesus was a created being, you don’t have a Trinity.

So which is it? The solution is actually pretty logical. If the Wisdom we’re talking about is *God’s* Wisdom, then it must have always existed, since the only time it could not have existed would be *when God didn’t exist*—but God is eternal. Therefore, Wisdom must also be eternal. Wisdom in Prov. 8:22 could not have been “created” in the sense that there was a time when Wisdom “was not” because there was never a time when God “was not.” You can’t have the biblical God if that God does not have Wisdom. Wisdom exists with God as his attribute, and God is eternal, without beginning. The translation “possessed” isn’t bad since it speaks to God’s eternal possession of this attribute, and so the eternality of the attribute. “Brought forth” is consistent with eternality since Wisdom would be construed as something brought it into play when God created the heavens and the earth.

Wisdom in the Divine Council

While it's true that Wisdom is an attribute of God that gets personified by the biblical writer, there's more going on here than clever writing. The writer uses this technique to cast Wisdom, an attribute of God, as a person who displaces the procreating goddess of other religions. Wisdom therefore assumes a common role occupied by a goddess in the pagan belief systems of the nations surrounding Israel. This created the feel for the Israelite that there were two eternal beings in heaven who could neither be completely fused into one, nor separated. Wisdom wasn't Yahweh, but couldn't be divorced from Yahweh either. The result is that the seed idea of a godhead—one God but plural persons—was planted in the mind of the Israelite who read the passages we've discussed here. We'll see this idea expressed again and again in the chapters that follow.

Jewish writers in the period between our Old and New Testaments expressed this notion in pretty explicit terms. Here are some examples:

Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-4, 9-11

¹ O God of my fathers, and Lord of mercy, who has made all things with your word, ² And ordained man through your Wisdom, that he should have dominion over the creatures which you have made, ³ And order the world according to equity and righteousness, and execute judgment with an upright heart: ⁴ Give me Wisdom, who sits alongside your throne; and do not reject me from among your children:

⁹ And Wisdom was with you, who knows your works, and was present when you made the world, and knew what was acceptable in your sight, and right in your commandments. ¹⁰ O send her out of your holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory, that being present she may work with me, that I may know what is pleasing unto you. ¹¹ For she knows and understands all things, and she shall lead me soberly in my doings, and preserve me in her power.

Sirach 24:1-5

¹ Wisdom shall praise herself, and shall glory in the midst of her people. ² In the council of the most High shall she open her mouth, and triumph before his power. ³ I came out of the mouth of the most High, and covered the earth as a cloud. ⁴ I dwelt in high places, and my throne is in a cloudy pillar. ⁵ I alone compassed the circuit of heaven, and walked in the bottom of the deep.

The language is startling. The Jewish writer, committed to a theology that there was only one unique Yahweh among the *elohim*, places Wisdom either alongside the throne of God or as coming from God's own throne, having come from God himself! As we'll see in a later chapter, this is exactly the same kind of language the New Testament uses of Jesus.²⁷ This means that Wisdom was part of the divine council, and linked to God's throne of authority. This in turn indicates once again that the divine council included the notion of a godhead. Frankly, the godhead preceded the divine council. In the beginning there was God and his Wisdom. The godhead created all things that exist, even the invisible things—the lesser *elohim* of the divine council we read about in Chapter One. Moreover, from the very beginning, even before creation,

there was hierarchy in heaven—there was Yahweh and his chief agent.²⁸ This conception will reappear many times as we continue on our journey.

It's not a new idea that the godhead was around before the foundations of our world were laid, but you probably didn't think of that idea operating in terms of the divine council. All of this, however, provides critical background information for comprehending what was going on when Yahweh announced a momentous, glorious decision to his divine council: "Let's make humankind in our image!"

²² See Colossians 1:13-17 and 1 Cor. 8:6.

²³ When describing a goddess, the Hebrew Bible uses the masculine form of the word for "god," not the expected feminine form.

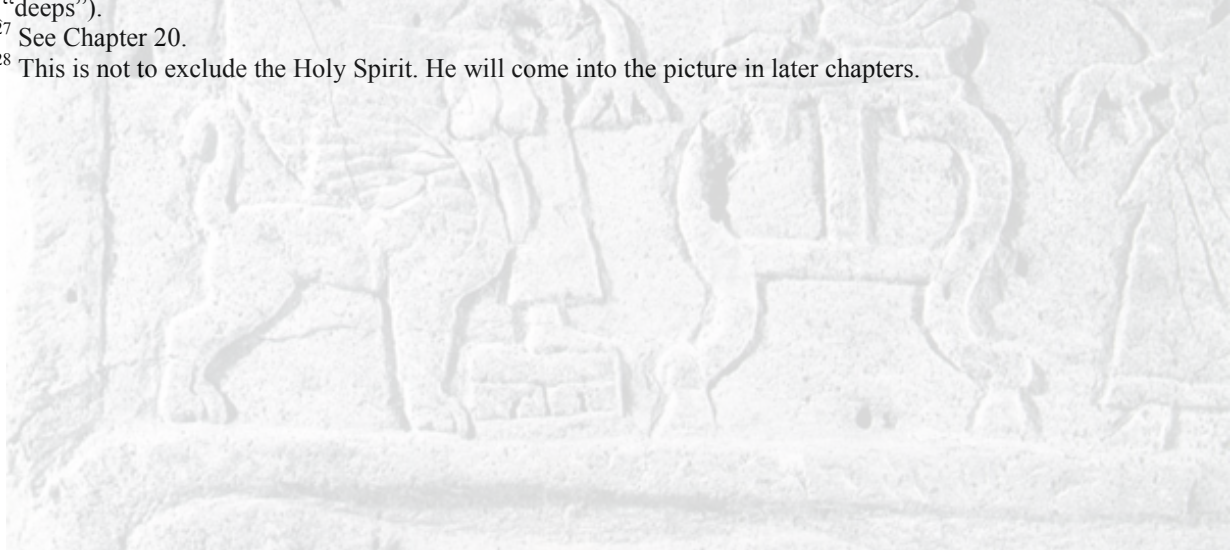
²⁴ Sometimes we do this in English in an abstract way. For example, we speak of ships or cars as feminine ("*she* was the grandest ship on the sea"; "*she* really flies").

²⁵ As one grammar puts it, "Gender is a feature allocated to nouns *on the basis of their form or the way they combine with other elements in a clause*" (Christo Van der Merwe, Jackie Naudé, Jan Kroeze, Christo Van der Merwe, Jackie Naudé, and Jan Kroeze. *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997). English usually telegraphs word relationships by word order. We can tell by listening or reading what word goes with what other word or words. Other languages put little emphasis on word order. They attach endings to words that indicate gender, number [e.g., singular or plural], and role in the sentence. This is called "inflection."

²⁶ See Psa. 89:11; 102:25; 104:5, 8; ("founding"); Psa. 65:6; 74:16; 119:90; Prov. 8:27 ("established"); Gen. 1:2 ("deeps").

²⁷ See Chapter 20.

²⁸ This is not to exclude the Holy Spirit. He will come into the picture in later chapters.



Chapter 4

As in Heaven, So on Earth

The axiom “As in heaven, so on earth” is familiar to most Christians. We usually associate the idea with the Lord’s Prayer. The idea is much older, though, and is fundamental to understanding God’s original intention behind His creation of human beings, an intention more readily processed now that we’ve been introduced to God’s heavenly council.

Creator or Creators?

Let’s start with Genesis 1:26-28. Note the underlining carefully:

26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind as our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” 27 So God created man as his own image, as the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

A lot of Bible readers have noted the plural pronouns (“us”; “our”) with curiosity. I’ll be discussing those in more detail in the next chapter. For now I’ll be up front and let you know that the best explanation for them is not the Trinity but the members of his divine council, the heavenly host. Among scholars the wording of Genesis 1:26 is called the “plural of exhortation”—a fancy way of saying *one* person is announcing something to a *group*. God comes to the divine council with an exciting announcement: “let’s create humankind!” It would be like me going into a room of friends and saying, “Hey, let’s go get some pizza!”

But if God is speaking to his divine council here, does that suggest at all that humankind was created by more than one being, by the lesser gods of the divine council? And if that’s the case, is that a contradiction with Genesis 2, where we don’t see any council in that chapter’s elaboration on the creation of Adam and Eve? These are important, natural questions, but no cause for concern. Genesis 1:27 tells us very plainly that, when it came down to the act of creating humanity, only the single God of the Bible did that. How do we know that? At the risk of dredging up painful memories of your high school English classes, the answer is “grammar says so.”

If you take a close look at verse 27, it’s obvious as to who is doing the creating: “So God created man as his own image, as the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” One grammatical clue is obvious, even in English. If more than one god was participating in the creation of humanity, the text would read “in *their own* image.” The pronouns, though, are *singular*—they refer to one person. Less obvious is the fact that all the underlying Hebrew verbs

in this verse that speak of creating are also *singular*. Although the exhortation went out to a whole group (the council), only *one* being created humankind—the God of Israel.

Image or Imager?

If you've been studying the Bible for even a little while you've probably wondered about what the image of God is. Chances are you have heard a sermon or two on the topic. I'll also bet that what you've heard is something along the lines of the image of God being intelligence, rationality, emotions, the ability to commune with God, self-awareness, language capability, the presence of a soul, a conscience, or free will. If that's the case, and if what you heard sounded good, prepare for another jolt: the image of God means none of those things and if it did, there would be no reason to talk about the sanctity of human life in the womb, at least in the early stages of development.

Genesis 1 and 2 teach us several things about the image of God, and *all* of what we learn from the text must be accounted for in any discussion of what "the image" means. First, both men and women are equally included in what I'll call for now "divine image bearing." Second, divine image bearing is what makes humankind distinct from the rest of the Genesis creation (i.e., plants and animals). Note, however, that the text of Genesis 1:26 does *not* inform us that divine image bearing makes us distinct from heavenly beings, those sons of God who were already in existence at the time of creation. The plurals in Genesis 1:26 mean that, in some way, we share something with them when it comes to bearing God's image. Third, there is something about the image that makes mankind "like" God in some way. Fourth, there is nothing in the text to suggest that the image has been or can be bestowed incrementally or partially. You're either created as God's image bearer or you aren't. One cannot speak of being "partly" created in God's image or "potentially" bearing the image.

That leads us back to my comment about the sanctity of human life. Among the list of proposed answers to what the image is are a number of *abilities* or *properties*: intelligence, rationality, emotions, communing with God, self-awareness, language capability, and free will. The problem with defining the image by any of these things is that, on one hand, non-human beings like animals possess *some* of these abilities, albeit not as fully, which would mean they are not unique to humans. On the other hand, the conceived contents of a woman's womb, when composed of little more than cells or tissue prior to brain development, has *none* of them. Animals can learn to do things contrary to their nature, they can show emotion, and they have language (we have no reason to assume language must be across species, as opposed to *within* species). Artificial intelligence has achieved some of these properties as well.

The pro-life position is based on the assertion that human life (and so, personhood) begins at conception (the point when the female egg is fertilized by the male sperm). The simple-celled zygote inside the woman's womb, which we believe to be a human person, is not self-aware; has no intelligence, rational thought processes, or emotions; it cannot speak or communicate; it cannot commune with God; and it cannot exercise its will or conscience. If you want to argue that those things are there potentially, then that means that its personhood is only potential, which is the pro-choice position. A potentially human person is not an actual human person, and so abortion in the early stages would not be murder. Since there is no hint in Genesis that the

image comes in stages, defining the image of God in such terms raises the spectre that, to base personhood on the image, the image must be actually present. This is a precarious ethical position.

Even the presence of a soul fails these tests. The former doesn't work because animals also possess the *nephesh*, the Hebrew word translated "soul" in Genesis 2:7 ("and the man became a living *soul*"). For example, in Genesis 1:20 when we read that God made swarms of "living creatures," the Hebrew text underlying "creatures" is *nephesh*. The term means "conscious life" or "animate life" as opposed to something like plant life, and there are other clear examples where animals are described with the same word.²⁹ My point here is not that humans don't have a soul. They certainly do, and it is linked to personhood in biblical theology. My point is only that the soul isn't the image.

My view of what the image means is based on a point of Hebrew grammar, specifically a special function of the preposition "in" with respect to the phrase "*in* the image of God." In our own English language—and we don't often think about our own language in such detail—we use the preposition "in" to denote many different ideas. That is, "in" doesn't always mean the same thing when we use that word. For example, if I say, "put the dishes *in* the sink," I am using the preposition to denote *location*. If I say, "I broke the mirror *in* pieces," I am using "in" to denote the *result* of some action or accident. If I say, "I work *in* education," I am using the preposition to denote that I was *as* a teacher or principal, or some other administrative capacity.

This last example is the key to understanding what the Hebrew preposition usually translated "in" means in Gen 1:26—and that will in turn unlock the meaning of image bearing. The idea I want to put forth is that humankind was created as God's image. In other words, the preposition tells us that humans work *as* God's imagers—that they work *in the capacity of* God's representatives. The image is therefore not a thing put in us; it is something we *do* or *are*. It is not a thing; it is a function or status. Don't think of it as a noun; think of it as a *verb*. Being created as God's imagers means we are God's representatives on earth. Humans were created to rule and care for the earth as God would if he were physically present. It is as though *we are Him* when it comes to overseeing His earth. This duty is part of being human, and you are human (by virtue of your DNA) from conception. This is why Genesis 1:26-27 are followed by what theologians call the "dominion mandate"—that these humans are now to "subdue the earth" (1:28). Verse 28 helps define verses 26-27.

If you are human, then, you are an imager of God, regardless of your abilities. You use your abilities to steward the planet in whatever way you can wherever you are. For some that means farming, bringing forth the earth's abundance. For others it's being a scientist, learning what makes the earth and the universe tick. For still others it's being in business, creating wealth, goods, and services for human work and well-being. Every moral form of gainful employment carries out some task that benefits the earth and its inhabitants—that seeks to fulfill the purpose of the earth in God's mind as he intended it. All such jobs have God's blessing. Being in the ministry is no more sacred than anything else done in God's will. *That* is what imaging means. Even the stillborn baby or severely retarded person is an imager (since they are human, by definition). The status of imager is passed on to every human. Every human therefore has the dignity of being God's stand-ins on this planet. We may not understand how human lives such

as these can image God and serve the creation, but they do. Perhaps their purpose is to compel us to appreciate “normal” creation or creation before the Fall brought such tragic consequences to life as God intended.

How do we share this function or status with the members of God’s council? We share this status in general in that they, too, are God’s administrators. They do as God wills as though he were there. Like us, they are the conduits for God’s actions on behalf of (or in spite of) people. However, when it comes to earth, we outrank them, for it was to humanity God gave the earth for stewardship, not to any other being.

This sweeping “status promotion” is critical for understanding the flow of biblical theology. In the ancient world outside of Israel, the idea of being God’s earthly human representative was reserved only for kings. You might recall the notion of the Pharaoh being “God on earth” as an example. In fact, the idea that royal bloodlines were also divine bloodlines survives even to today. In Europe, the absolute monarchies of France and England operated on the assumption of “the divine right to rule.” Before World War II, Japanese Emperors were thought of in such terms. In non-western cultures, the same idea still survives.

The amazing thing about Genesis 1:26 is that it tells us that, from the very beginning, God intended *all humans* to be His royal representatives. The image of God idea is thoroughly democratic in biblical theology. Like the members of God’s heavenly family, we are *all* God’s children—and God made us His imagers in this place. We were not created as God’s slaves. We are His children and members of his royal household. We were intended to rule the earth together as Father and sons and daughters.³⁰

God’s Terrestrial Throne Room

As if this wasn’t enough, as God’s royal sons and daughters, we were also intended to be members of God’s divine council. That’s not readily apparent from Gen 1:26-27. For that we need to take a brief look at the place where God intended humankind to dwell, the garden of Eden and its connection to the divine council.

As I noted in the Preface, certain things in the Bible can only be properly understood in the full context of ancient Israelite religion, which in turn can at times only be understood in terms of the broad worldview Israel shared with the surrounding cultures. Eden is a good case in point.

Like Israel, the people of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, for example, also believed in an unseen spiritual world that was governed by a divine council. While biblical Israel’s faith described a single unique “God of gods” as sovereign, the literature of her pagan neighbors described an elite group of gods who ran the cosmos and who were served by other gods or human slaves. These gods held their meetings and lived in luxuriant gardens. These gardens were well watered with rivers and subterranean springs that watered the rest of the earth, and had trees that had supernatural attributes or powers.³¹ The “garden of the gods” was typically situated on a mountain, and so the divine garden was also frequently referred to as the “mountain of the gods.” It was at this place that the gods lived, held council, and announced decrees. Curiously, the gods were thought to live and meet in tents in these divine gardens and mountains.

All of these motifs for the dwelling place and headquarters of the divine council occur in the Bible with respect to Eden. We're all familiar with the description of Eden in Genesis as a garden with four rivers, and hence a "well-watered" place (Gen. 2:10-14), but it will no doubt be a surprise to many readers that Eden is also described in the Bible as a *mountain*! Ezekiel 28:13-14 explicitly refers to Eden as "the garden of God" *and* "the mountain of God"—attributing both kinds of descriptions of the meeting place of the divine council. Ezekiel 28:2 also refers to this place as the "seat of the gods" (*moshab elohim*). Even in our own English language the word "seat" refers to the place of administration ("county seat"). Amazingly, this "seat"—Eden, the garden and mountain of God, the place of divine council government—is described by Ezekiel as being "in the midst of the seas" (Ezek. 28:2), again utilizing the well-watered imagery of the council headquarters that would be familiar to ancient people in biblical times.

In biblical terms, then, Eden was the "heavenly-earthly" headquarters or nerve center from which Yahweh administered the earth through his divine council. Initially, Yahweh and his council had set up shop alone, but that all changed when Yahweh suddenly announced to the council that he had decided to make another creature who would be his imager, along with his heavenly sons, in this wonderful place. In fact, Yahweh announced, governance of this paradise would be handed over to the new kids on the block, called "humankind" and whom Psalm 8:5 described as inferior to the sons of God ("you have made him a little lower than the *elohim*").³²

Since Eden was the place where both spheres intersected, it was God's intent that humankind share membership in and be an extension of his divine council. Job 15:7-8 give us a hint of this when one of Job's friends taunts him by comparing Job to Adam: "Are you the first man who was born? Or were you brought forth before the hills? Have you listened in the council of God (*eloah*)?" The *elohim* would assist God's sovereign rule from the spiritual plane, and humankind would take over on the earthly plane. It was a wonderful plan, but to understand how it was supposed to work—and how it went off track—we need to sort out the relationship of imaging, free will, and God's sovereignty to one another. If you've ever thought about those subjects and had your head spin, don't despair. There is an answer. Really.

²⁹ See Gen 1:21, 24, 30. Genesis 1:30 is interesting in that the text tells refers to the "living *nephesh*" as being *in* animals.

³⁰ The last comment about "sons and daughters" extends from the equal imaging status of "male and female" (Genesis 1:27). There is no gender distinction when it comes to imaging status, no hint that male imagers are superior to female imagers. In fact, the commands given immediately afterward are plural, reinforcing the point that both genders, side by side, were to "subdue" and "have dominion" over the earth. While it may be the case that later in the New Testament we find that Paul argued for some hierarchical relationship between male and female, based on who was created before whom, and who was created for whom (1 Cor. 11:2-16; 1 Tim 2:13), Paul's point is being made in relation to headship within the home against the specific backdrop of the Genesis 6 incident ("because of the angels" in 1 Cor. 11:10; see Chapter 6). There is no clear indication that Paul's discussion in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 was intended to apply to the question of female ordination. That said, the statement of 1 Cor. 11:3 with respect to God being the head of Christ is noteworthy, for it plainly suggests that there is hierarchy within the godhead. Though the godhead is composed of persons who are absolutely the same in essence, those persons have a hierarchical relationship. This relationship was present from the very beginning, prior to creation, since it is the second person (Christ) who as the agent of creation at the behest of the Father. Hierarchy in role is therefore compatible with sameness or equality in essential being. There are a number of issues relating to gender roles in imaging God, including roles within the Church, but those are beyond the scope of this book. See www.themyththatistrue.com for further discussion.

³¹ See the articles “Eden, Garden of (Place)” and “Garden of God” in the Anchor Bible Dictionary for a more detailed discussion.

³² *Elohim* of course could be translated as a singular (“a little lower than God”), but when this verse is quoted by the author of Hebrews (Heb 2:7), it is taken as a plural (“angels”). The Septuagint also takes it plural, and is the source of the quotation in Heb 2:7.



Chapter 5

Costly Decisions

It's hard to imagine why God would bother creating anything. Preachers and devotional writers at times wax eloquent about God's motivation, supposing that God wanted to express himself, or wanted to be worshipped, or felt somehow compelled by his own love or joy to call all things into being. While these speculations might warm our hearts, they aren't actually helpful. In fact, they make it sound as though God had some emotional deficit to fill, or creation happened in response to some spasmodic urge God couldn't contain. God needs nothing and has no urges that need attention. God would have been fully complete in himself had he not created anything. All we can say with certainty is that he did create all things other than himself, and that some of those creatures share some of his own attributes.

Knowing Good and Evil

We know humans were not the first intelligent beings God created, since the heavenly sons of God were already present when the earth was formed (Job 38:4-7),³³ an event that obviously preceded the creation of humanity. We have also seen by now that the well known exhortation "let us make humankind in our image" meant that both divine beings and human beings were created as imagers of God—representatives of God wherever he placed them to serve him. This understanding helps us come to grips with some other plurality language in the early chapters of Genesis, particularly that associated with the Fall, how that tragic event was made possible, and why the divine plurality language should be distanced from the Trinity. Let's take the last point first.

Many readers will reflexively assume that "let us create humankind in our image" echoes the members of the Trinity. This option is fundamentally unsound since it reads later theology back into a passage, but also because of the harm done to the Trinity when that explanation is taken to other passages where language reflecting divine plurality occurs. Psalm 82, introduced in Chapter 2, comes immediately to mind, since in that psalm the other gods are charged with moral corruption. The Trinity obviously cannot be in view there.

Any discussion of this plurality language must also incorporate Gen 3:22, which adds to the awkwardness of seeing the Trinity in Gen 1:26. After Adam sinned God declared, "the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." If the "us" of Gen 1:26 refers to the Trinity, then one would expect that when God says Adam has become "like one of us" after his transgression, he is speaking to the other members of the Trinity. Those scholars who, as noted in Chapter 2, never want to see the word *elohim* as referring to multiple divine beings are apparently driven to a Trinitarian view of Gen 3:22, for prior to the failure of Eve the serpent (correctly, in light of Gen 3:22) had told Eve that God did not want the humans to eat of the forbidden tree since when they did they would become like *elohim* (Gen 3:5).

My view is that *elohim* in Gen 3:5 should be translated plural (they would become “as gods” since Gen 3:22 clearly requires a plural understanding (“one of us”). These *elohim* are the members of the divine council in Eden, God’s abode and headquarters. Those who reject that perspective must say that the serpent told Eve that when she ate she would become like the other members of the Trinity (i.e., the triune God). This raises the question of what God did not want Adam and Eve to learn that would make them like the triune God. This is a difficult question to answer for those who want to defend the idea that the plural language speaks of the Trinity.

Many theologians argue that “knowing” evil means just *seeing* it happen or having an *intellectual* knowledge without actual experience of evil. This wording is deliberate, since the members of the Trinity cannot actually commit evil, but they can see it. But Adam and Eve didn’t *watch* someone else sin; they were the ones that sinned. It also seems very clear that Eve already intellectually understood what sin was. Eve’s conversation with the serpent tells us that she *knew* eating of the forbidden fruit meant disobedience to God. She needed no explanation as to what disobedience (sin) entailed. Other theologians argue that “knowing good and evil” refers to making decisions, something the Trinity could do without being morally suspect. This answer is equally flawed. Adam had made plenty of decisions before falling into sin (e.g., he decided what to name the animals). Eve decided to talk to the serpent and to eat. Since Adam and Eve already had decision-making ability prior to the Fall, that ability cannot be the explanation of their state after the Fall.

The correct interpretation of the “knowing good and evil” phrase and its associated plural (“us”) must account for several things:

- (1) After the Fall, Adam and Eve were in a state that made them like the divine beings in God’s heavenly host.
- (2) That state also made them like God. When God said that the fallen Adam and Eve had become “as one of us” he included himself in that number along with the other divine beings he had previously created.
- (3) This “knowing” state was something that God did not desire for humanity, else he would not have forbidden eating of that particular tree, and would not have attached dire consequences to it.

The phrase “knowing good and evil” in question occurs in only one other passage outside Genesis 2-3, Deut 1:39:

And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it.

The context is important for understanding not only the meaning of the phrase in Deut 1:39, but also more broadly. The “little ones” referred to here are the generation of Israelites that would arise after the original generation that had escaped from Egypt at the exodus. That first

generation had been sentenced by God to wander in the desert for forty years until they died off for their refusal to enter the Promised Land in conquest (Num 14). The new generation “had no knowledge of good and evil” and would be allowed entrance into the land.

The meaning is clearly that the second generation *was not held morally accountable* for the sins of their parents. Though as children they were under the authority of their parents, they had no decision-making authority in the matter and were thus not willing participants. As such, they were not considered liable. They were innocent.

This context makes good sense in Gen 3. Prior to knowing good and evil, Adam and Eve were innocent of any moral accountability. Though under God’s authority, Adam and Eve had never made a willing, conscious decision to disobey God. *They had never been considered morally responsible for their actions.* Now that had changed. It was God’s wish that they never find themselves in such a position, since it would mean his original intent for creating humankind would be derailed. He would have to punish the transgression and was justified in doing so.

How does this apply to the members of God’s council? How were Adam and Eve now like them? Adam and Eve now found themselves morally responsible to God just as the members of the council were already held morally responsible for their actions. There is no indication that the *elohim* of the council were considered innocent by God or were given a “grace period” of innocence. On the contrary, when one of these divine beings does transgress God’s wishes (the serpent, elsewhere described as a divine being; see Chapter 7), they are immediately considered accountable and not innocent.

In principle the same idea applies to God. While there is no authority over God, either. God is morally accountable for what he does, but that accountability is to himself. This sounds odd, but Scripture actually affirms it with respect to God’s covenant with Abraham. For his part, Abraham was accountable to God for believing God and obeying what God said as his adopted child (Gen 17:1-2; 22:16-18). But who would hold God accountable? As the writer of Hebrews expressed it, “For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself” (Heb 6:13).

Adam and Eve were now morally responsible for their actions. God was not trying to keep something good from them. It had been God’s wish that they never find themselves in such a position, since it would mean his original intent for creating humankind would be derailed and they would have to be punished.

How Could the Fall Have Happened?

If you are tracking to this point in our journey you can see how God set the stage for his original plan. God intended for his human imagers, his human family, to live with him in that slice of earthly perfection known as Eden, along with his divine imagers, the divine sons of God. Since we have the book of Revelation, which informs us that when all is rectified the entire globe will be Edenic, we can imagine that, had humanity not rebelled, eventually the

perfection of Eden would have overspread the earth. Heaven would literally meet earth on a global scale, and all God's imagers would rule and administer that world.

How could things have gone so wrong?

This is an obvious question. What isn't so obvious is that the Fall occurred as the result of a decision on God's part that was truly wonderful. That something was free will, given to humans, as well as God's other imagers.

Acknowledging genuine free will contributes to answering other questions: How and why could Adam and Eve sin if their natures were not evil? How did the serpent come to tempt Eve, itself an act of evil? The answer to these questions is that all these agents were free to make the choices they made. They were not compelled by predestination to do what they did, even though God foreknew what would happen if such freedom was extended.

I raise these questions because, whether we realize it or not, their implications have a direct impact on how we view all that goes on in the *invisible* world and the epic battle between good and evil for the souls of humankind. While God foreknows events he does not decree or need evil. Evil happens because God's imagers share his attribute of freedom—an attribute that is in fact essential to being God's imager. And though it made the Fall possible, it was the best thing God ever did for us.

These assertions need explaining, so let's unpack one idea at a time. Let's start with the connection between imaging God and free will.

Recall that the language of Gen 1:26 ("let *us* create humankind in *our* image") tells us that not only were God and the other heavenly beings around prior to humanity, but that human beings shared something both God and the other heavenly beings already had in common, at least to some degree. God created us in some way like himself and like his heavenly host without compromising his own uniqueness. I am suggesting that we think of this common bond in terms of sharing attributes of God.

Theologians have articulated the idea of shared ("communicable") attributes between God and humankind for centuries. One of God's attributes that he shares with us, and other non-human imagers, is freedom. Others include power, intelligence, love, etc. The critical point is this: if we are imagers of God—truly like him—then we *must* have genuine free will. We cannot be like God and not be free. Why? Because imaging God means acting as God in his place, as though he were here. We mirror God, and God is a free being. If our free will is removed, we would cease to be imagers of God. We would not be like him or be able to function as he would with respect to the tasks he has given humanity. Free will is essential to imaging God.

Let's unpack this a little more. What do we mean by "free will" and how does that reflect God? When we talk about free will we need to think carefully about what we mean and don't mean, and what can be said from the perspective of Scripture, and what can't be said. We

also need a definition that applies equally to human beings and intelligent members of the heavenly host.

In briefest terms, free will is the ability to make a choice without coercion. This does not mean our decisions are made in total freedom, however. Total freedom involves (1) making choices without *any* external influence at all, or (2) having the power to filter all external influences at will so as to make a truly independent, self-contained choice. Only God has such total freedom. He exercised the first when he made decisions before there were any created beings who might interact with him. The second is a power that most theologians admit God has, but they disagree as to how much God might allow our actions to influence him.

We, on the other hand, have no such autonomy. Any decision we make is made either because of some immediate influence on that decision, or because of the cumulative effect on our character by previous influences and decisions. No human being has ever been in such complete isolation that God or any other human being has never influenced them. There is no scriptural warrant for anyone being so completely abandoned by God, and no human being has survived without some environment that included other human interaction. There is no such thing as total autonomy in decision making within the world that God has created and in which he has put us. It must be understood, though, that coercion and influence are not the same. The former nullifies free will; the latter is in constant cooperation with it.

So why is free will so wonderful? Just consider the alternative. If our decisions were all coerced, how authentic would those “decisions” actually be? If love is coerced, is it really love? If hate is coerced, is it really hate? Is *any* coerced decision really a genuine *decision* at all? Not if no other option was possible because of the coercion. We all know the difference, too. When your Mom made you eat your broccoli, that was coercion, not a choice. The IRS doesn’t tell you that you *may perhaps* pay your taxes by April 15. How satisfying or comforting would it be to hear your spouse or a parent say they love you if they were not truly free to refuse to do so, but they do it anyway? We appreciate such statements all the more since we know our spouse or parent could actually decide otherwise. The viability of the alternative makes the choice precious.

In the theological realm, this subject quite quickly becomes intertwined with the issues of God’s foreknowledge, predestination, and omniscience. For example, without genuine free will, how can we say we love God? If we obey because our obedience was predestinated, that means we couldn’t do otherwise, which means we didn’t really *choose* to obey God. We had to obey. Isn’t God’s predestination therefore coercive? The same goes for sin. If God foreknows you will commit a particular sin and you in fact commit that sin, how could you *not* have committed that sin—and so how are you genuinely responsible for that sin? How is this not “coercion by predestination”?

How are these difficulties to be addressed? Some theologians assume that God needs to be in direct control over *every* decision—that he needs to be the ultimate cause of *every* event—in order to be sovereign. If this is not the case, it is argued, then God isn’t the controller of the universe, someone else is (or everyone is, at any given point). This notion is then wedded to

God's omniscience so that God's foreknowledge of all decisions necessitates divine predestination of all decisions. Our freedom in such a perspective is then defined as our ability to make decisions that God has predestined but that our desires or nature *also* agrees with. That way, we are told, we are still responsible for our actions. And since evil cannot be exempted from predestination, it must therefore exist because God has willed it to exist—he is somehow the ultimate cause. This is usually conceived of as a passive, permissive causation—God *allowed* evil to enter creation, but did not initiate it. But this is like saying God allows something to conform to his predestination, which implies he could disallow something to conform to what he has already predestined—which is incoherent.

On the other side are those theologians who have argued that God has taken a totally hands-off approach. They usually do not argue that humans are totally without influence in the decisions they make, since that would require quarantine from all other humans and from God. However, since God does not control every human decision, he doesn't actually know what everyone will do all the time. This in turn means that God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge, and so he is not omniscient, at least in the traditional sense. Humans are certainly responsible for their own actions in such a view. And while God is not to blame for evil, we are left with the impression that he cannot control it, and so evil has a sort of independence from God. If that is the case, how can God be the conqueror of evil without being able to control it completely?

Decreed Ends and Free Means

Since we aren't told much in Genesis about how human freedom works in relation to divine attributes like foreknowledge, predestination, sovereignty, and omniscience, we need to look elsewhere in Scripture for some clarification. There are two important passages to consider. The first is 1 Samuel 23:1-14. Note the underlining carefully.

¹ Now they told David, "Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are robbing the threshing floors." ² Therefore David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" And the LORD said to David, "Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah." ³ But David's men said to him, "Behold, we are afraid here in Judah; how much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?" ⁴ Then David inquired of the LORD again. And the LORD answered him, "Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand." ⁵ And David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines and brought away their livestock and struck them with a great blow. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah. ⁶ When Abiathar the son of Ahimelech had fled to David to Keilah, he had come down with an ephod in his hand. ⁷ Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, "God has given him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars." ⁸ And Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men. ⁹ David knew that Saul was plotting harm against him. And he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod here." ¹⁰ Then said David, "O LORD, the God of Israel, your servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. ¹¹ Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O

LORD, the God of Israel, please tell your servant.” And the LORD said, “He will come down.”¹² Then David said, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” And the LORD said, “They will surrender you.”¹³ Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition.¹⁴ And David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the Wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand.

In this account, David appeals to the omniscient God to tell him about the future. In the first instance (23:1-5), David asks God whether he should go to the city of Keilah and whether he’ll successfully defeat the Philistines there. God answers in the affirmative in both cases, David goes to Keilah, and indeed defeats the Philistines.

In the second section (23:6-14), David asks the Lord two questions: (1) will his nemesis Saul come to Keilah and threaten the city on account of David’s presence? And (2) will the people of Keilah turn him over to Saul to avoid an attack on the city? Again, God answers both questions affirmatively. Saul is going to come down and the people of Keilah will hand you over to him. But here’s the interesting point—*neither of those things actually happen*. Once David hears God’s answer, he and his men leave the city. When Saul discovers this fact (v. 13), he abandons his trip to Keilah. Saul never actually goes to Keilah, and therefore David is never handed over by the people of Keilah to Saul. But why is this significant?

This passage (specifically the second section) clearly establishes that divine foreknowledge does *not necessitate* divine predestination. God foreknew what Saul would do and what the people of Keilah would do given a set of circumstances. In other words, God foreknew a *possibility*—but this foreknowledge did not mandate that the possibility was actually predestinated to happen. The events never happened, so they could not have been predestinated, despite the fact they had been foreknown by God. Predestination and foreknowledge are separable.

The same idea comes through in other passages. For example:

Matthew 11

²⁰ Then he [Jesus] began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹ “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

In Matthew 11 we see Jesus' (fore)knowledgeable declaration that had a given set of circumstances prevailed an outcome different than what happened in "real time" would have ensued. The theological point can be put this way:

That which never happens can be foreknown by God, but it is not predestinated.

But what about things that *do* happen? They can obviously be foreknown, but are they predestinated if they are foreknown? There are two ways to look at this, and both may be simultaneously true.

First, it might sound awkward, but since we have seen above that foreknowledge *in itself* does not necessitate predestination, all that foreknowledge truly guarantees is that something is foreknown. It can be coherently argued that if God foreknows some event that happens, then he *may have* predestinated that event. But as 1 Samuel 23 informs us, a foreknown event is not guaranteed to have been predestinated. The only guarantee is that God foreknew it correctly, whether actual or merely possible. I would also add that since 1 Samuel 23 shows us that God knows things "actual and possible," there is no reason to think that he cannot foreknow *all* things actual and possible, a very traditional approach to omniscience. This would mean that God can foreknow both our actual and possible decisions, but need not predestine either.

Second, God may foreknow an event and predestinate that same event, but such predestination may pertain only to the specific *end result* or outcome of a series of events that are not specifically predestinated. In other words, God may know and predestinate the end—how something is ultimately going to turn out according to his will—but other precursor events to that ultimate end may not be predestinated (though, as noted above, it's quite reasonable to assume God foreknew them as well). This brings us to our second important passage, 1 Kings 22:1-23, as it provides an illustration of what I'm describing here.

¹ For three years Syria and Israel continued without war. ² But in the third year Jehoshaphat the king of Judah came down to the king of Israel. ³ And the king of Israel said to his servants, "Do you know that Ramoth-gilead belongs to us, and we keep quiet and do not take it out of the hand of the king of Syria?" ⁴ And he said to Jehoshaphat, "Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?" And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses." ⁵ And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "Inquire first for the word of the LORD." ⁶ Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred men, and said to them, "Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?" And they said, "Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king." ⁷ But Jehoshaphat said, "Is there not here another prophet of the LORD of whom we may inquire?" ⁸ And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil." And Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say so." ⁹ Then the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, "Bring quickly Micaiah the son of Imlah." ¹⁰ Now the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat the king of Judah were sitting on their thrones, arrayed in their robes, at the threshing floor at the

entrance of the gate of Samaria, and all the prophets were prophesying before them.¹¹ And Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah made for himself horns of iron and said, “Thus says the LORD, ‘With these you shall push the Syrians until they are destroyed.’ ”¹² And all the prophets prophesied so and said, “Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.”¹³ And the messenger who went to summon Micaiah said to him, “Behold, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king. Let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.”¹⁴ But Micaiah said, “As the LORD lives, what the LORD says to me, that I will speak.”¹⁵ And when he had come to the king, the king said to him, “Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?” And he answered him, “Go up and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.”¹⁶ But the king said to him, “How many times shall I make you swear that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?”¹⁷ And he [Micaiah] said, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, ‘These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.’ ”¹⁸ And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?”¹⁹ And Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left;²⁰ and the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said one thing, and another said another.²¹ Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’²² And the LORD said to him, ‘By what means?’ And he said, ‘I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.’²³ Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you.”

This passage, specifically verses 19-22, describes a meeting in the heavens among God and the members of his heavenly host. We read in verse 20 that God had decided it was time for wicked king Ahab to die. That much, we know, had been decreed by the Lord and so predestined—it was going to happen for sure. Ahab’s number was up. God then asks the other heavenly beings *how Ahab’s death should be accomplished*. God had already decided that Ahab was going to die at Ramoth-Gilead, but the means of his death was not yet determined. The heavenly beings of God’s heavenly council as it were, subsequently deliberated among themselves (v. 20 - “one said one thing, and another said another”) about how to do this. Finally, one of the heavenly beings comes forward (v. 21) with a proposition (v. 22): “I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” Upon hearing this, God says (paraphrasing), “Yep, that’ll work—go get it done.”

The point here is not that God learned anything. Indeed, my view is that he foreknew all the options that the heavenly beings came up with and debated among themselves, though we are not told that. The point is that *God predestinated an event yet future* (Ahab’s death), *but left it up to lesser beings with free will to accomplish the means by which the predestined event would occur*. God left the details to his agents—but the end was guaranteed, for the Lord had foreknown and decreed it. We see here a symbiosis of a predestinating God and his freewill beings. It is important to realize that *God himself decided to do things this way*. The freedom

of these lesser beings was genuine—they got to decide how to do what God wanted done—but God’s overall sovereignty did not suffer. The spirits in 1 Kings 22 were free—the text gives no indication they were coerced or just rubber stamping something—but they were not autonomous, as they bring their decision to the Lord (whom it appears would have vetoed a dumb idea!).

There are other less explicit glimpses of this kind of cooperation, where an event was predestinated by God—the only single being who has that kind of power and authority—and his lesser agents whom God allows to be part of a process of bringing about his decrees that includes their free (but not autonomous) choices. Take a close look at Daniel 4:1-27:

¹ King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! ² It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. ³ How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation. ⁴ I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. ⁵ I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me. ⁶ So I made a decree that all the wise men of Babylon should be brought before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. ⁷ Then the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers came in, and I told them the dream, but they could not make known to me its interpretation. ⁸ At last Daniel came in before me—he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods—and I told him the dream, saying, ⁹ “O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you and that no mystery is too difficult for you, tell me the visions of my dream that I saw and their interpretation. ¹⁰ The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. ¹¹ The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. ¹² Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. ¹³ “I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. ¹⁴ He proclaimed aloud and said thus: ‘Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches. ¹⁵ But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. ¹⁶ Let his mind be changed from a man’s, and let a beast’s mind be given to him; and let seven periods of time pass over him. ¹⁷ The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.’ ¹⁸ This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw. And you, O Belteshazzar, tell me the interpretation, because all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known to me the interpretation, but you are able, for the spirit of the holy gods is in you.” ¹⁹ Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king

answered and said, “Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.” Belteshazzar answered and said, “My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies! ²⁰ The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, ²¹ whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived— ²² it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth. ²³ And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, ‘Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him,’ ²⁴ this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, ²⁵ that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. ²⁶ And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules. ²⁷ Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.”

The point of interest for our purposes is that verse 17 says very plainly that the punishment laid upon Nebuchadnezzar “is by the decree of the *watchers*, the decision by the word of the *holy ones*. . . .” Note the plurals (“watchers” . . . “holy ones”). In some sense, this sovereign decree was made in part by these heavenly beings. I say in part, because the text of verse 17 continues (cf. vv. 24-25), “that the living may know that *the Most High* rules the kingdom of men.” It is clear that this decision was made by the Watchers under the authority of the (singular) Most High God, akin to what we saw going on in 1 Kings 22. God had made a decision, and these “watchers” had some role in that process.

Going back to our earlier theological proposition, let’s add one now:

1. *That which never happens can be foreknown by God, but it is not predestinated.*
2. *That which does happen was foreknown by God, but may or may not have been predestinated.*

What all this means with respect to God’s wonderful decision to give us (and other heavenly beings) free will is that there can be variability in the causation of events without impinging on divine foreknowledge and sovereignty. Contrary to what many theologians have said, God does not need to predestine every single event that ever occurs in order to be sovereign. Rather, as we have seen, foreknowledge does not necessitate predestination, and God can leave decisions to his free will beings all the while decreeing (predestinating) a final *outcome*. We are also not forced to conclude with some theologians that events not yet real

cannot be foreknown. This is an unnecessary conclusion to draw in the defense of genuine free will.

Perhaps an illustration from God's general revelation, the created world, will also be helpful. In the twentieth century, the study of the ultra small turned our understanding of the nature of matter and reality upside down. At the level of electrons and other subatomic particles, the observable universe begins breaking down into a bizarre world where, for example, elementary particles can occupy all places at the same time and nothing can be described in terms of certainty but only in terms of probability. The experimental evidence for all this was what prompted the great physicist, Albert Einstein, to retort, "God doesn't play dice." Einstein was honestly disturbed by the apparent randomness of nature and particle behavior that defied logic at the subatomic level. But the findings of physicists in the early decades of the 20th century have been verified countless times by subsequent generations of scientists in ever more complex experiments, using vastly more precise and powerful equipment. Today, the experimental evidence of these findings is essentially unchallenged. Yet the matter of everyday stuff we see and feel and experience does not disintegrate, and the physical processes that depend on this matter does not break down or lose its inherent characteristics and qualities.³⁴ Somehow, despite this true chaotic randomness, everything still works. When Paul tells us in Romans 1:20 that God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made," perhaps we should take that more seriously. It appears the natural world's combination of laws and genuine freedom mirror God's own governance of all things and all creatures.

The idea that God doesn't predestinate every event may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable. It might sound like God isn't in control. First, we need to be sure that our idea of God's control or sovereignty is grounded in the text of the Bible, not a creed or the teachings of a favorite author. Think of what I'm describing this way. What shows a more powerful God—having a God that predestinates every event before it happens, thereby nullifying the possibility of his creatures making any other decisions other than those invariably determined, or having a God that can integrate *any* decision made by a free will agent into a plan whose ultimate *conclusion* he has *ordained* so that nothing of his ultimate will is lost or overturned?

In practical terms, the passages we have considered inform us that predestination of all things must give way to sovereign oversight of free events as they move toward *selected predestinated ends*. Everything ends as God wills. God is in control and yet humans (and heavenly beings) are genuinely free—and accountable. *What we do matters in the course of God's plan*. But there is a dark side to all this. Free will means that free agents can proliferate evil—and since they are free, intelligent evil believes it can win the long war against God.

A Fateful Decision

The implications of all this are profound. Humans and heavenly divine beings have genuine free will. God may foreknow all things real and possible, but he does not predestinate every event. But what about evil? God must have foreknown the entrance of evil into his created

world by the acts of free agents. Was free will a colossal miscalculation? How do we process the entrance and perpetual disruption of evil?

It is true that God foreknew the cost of his decision to give intelligent creatures free will. We must acknowledge that, in his mind therefore, the cost of free will was to be preferred over the alternative—and that in choosing this preference, God knew what he was doing. And the solution to evil was not the revocation of this decision. This would be theologically aberrant, for it would mean that the one who knew all things didn't know enough to avoid a horrible mistake. No, God granted free will and with that decision came another—that *he would not remove or violate it*. Doing so would be a reversal of his own creative decree that results in remaking us into something *not* like himself (cf. Gen 1:26).

The fallout of this compels certain conclusions. First, God cannot just step into time as it were and stop a freewill decision, something we often want him to do when it comes to the horrific evil in the world. Second, while he will not take away free will, God can and does seek to influence people away from evil and toward righteousness, and skillfully uses agents such as angels and other people in that influencing process.³⁵ Third, God can and does protect us (or not) from the fallout of a freewill decision to choose evil, whether that decision was made by a human or other divine being. This is not a violation of free will, since it focuses on the results of an act, not the act itself. We are not abandoned, and God's ultimate decreed end is not overturned by evil's successes.

The fact that human beings and other heavenly beings have genuine free will means that the potential is there for free acts of evil. In fact, God's decision resulted in the entrance of evil into his creation—as he knew it would, since the death of Christ was something God did indeed ordain before the foundation of the world. But as we have seen, foreknowledge does not necessitate predestination. How did Satan become evil? He chose to disobey out of his own free will. Neither he nor other divine beings were created as evil beings. Did Satan have a choice in tempting Adam and Eve? Yes, and he made his choice, and is fully accountable for it. Was Satan compelled by God to do so because of predestination? No, the choice was free, but God foreknew it and had already decreed that, when all is said and done, his Son would be the key to undoing this evil. Were Adam and Eve forced by predestination to sin? No, they made a choice, but again God had already made plans to atone for their choices.

If you have ever wondered why Satan and other evil divine beings do what they do despite the power of God, this approach is the answer. There are evil divine beings because those beings have made evil choices and continue to wreak havoc in God's world. And since everything is not predestinated, they believe they can thwart God's purposes. This is why Scripture describes their opposition to a messianic bloodline, to the covenantal holiness of God's people, to the very survival of those who follow the true God. Though confronted with superior power, they think they can win the battle for the souls of humanity. And the fact is, they won battles in the Bible many times, and win countless battles today. Why wouldn't such victories, as frequent as they are, reinforce this belief? We may be assured of an ultimate end (which they may or may not deny), but evil has a lot of freedom. God has established parameters, and may (Job 1:6ff.) selectively restrict how far evil can go in

specific circumstances, but evil has not been predestinated out of its victories. The battle is real, and the stakes can go no higher.

Some would look at all this and assume that God's decision to give humankind genuine free will was pretty risky. I wouldn't use that term, since God is sovereign. The decision was a calculated one. He had foreseen and ordained an end to which he would steer all things. And yet there is a result of his decision: suffering. God deemed giving us and his other heavenly creatures free will preferable to creating us as mindless, will-less robots. And when I say preferable, I mean preferable *for us*, not God. God doesn't need to slant anything to his advantage. He needs no advantage and his sovereignty assures him (and us) that his plan will end as he ordained. Free will, despite the terrible consequences, is preferable for us. Without it we could not experience life as God intended, could not appreciate God's creation and blessings, could not rise above disaster, and could not minister to others who suffer. We would be mindless automatons, mere lackeys in a pointless divine exercise. Withholding free will to his creatures would be the ultimate act of selfishness for a god. It really would be *only* about him. But the mythic narrative of the Bible tells us on every page that just isn't the case.

³³ Job 38:4-7 reads: "4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, 7 when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture citations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

³⁴ My thanks to Charles Blevins for helping me with this wording.

³⁵ In terms of divine election, it could coherently be argued that God influences some people more than others—that is his choice. And we must acknowledge with Scripture that anyone who comes to faith in Christ must be influenced to do so by God. A spiritually dead individual (which would be every human being) cannot respond to the grace of God without divine influence (Eph. 2:1-10; Phil 2:12-13). In the sense that God has ordained the outcome and not intermediate events, one could still hold to irresistible grace, if by that one speaks of one of God's ultimately decreed outcomes. This is just an observation on my part, not an endorsement of any particular such argument.

Chapter 6

Appearances Can Be Deceiving

It's probably not much of a risk on my part to assume that you've heard of or read the story of the serpent and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But have you ever wondered why Eve wasn't scared witless when the "serpent" spoke to her? If you go back and read the account in Genesis 3, there's simply no indication that she did anything but suppress a yawn—but why would that be the case? And, more to the point, what does that have to do with the unfolding drama the Bible began with the creation of humankind? And why did I put "serpent" in quotation marks? So glad you asked.

Did You Notice the Problem?

Now, you might be thinking, "Well, maybe animals back then could talk." I've read this sort of thing before. I hope you'll pardon me when I say that's absurd. This isn't interpretation of the text; it's evasion of the issue. The only other instance where we have an animal speaking to a human being in the Bible is that of Balaam's donkey in Numbers 22:22-41. In that case the speech was prompted by an appearance of the divine vice regent, the Angel of the Lord, and the text plainly tells us that it was God who enabled the donkey to speak (v. 28). That certainly isn't the case in Genesis 3 with the serpent.

I know calling something absurd might not sound kind, but it's actually nicer than saying, "If you want to take that view, then I hope you can live with contradictions between passages in the Bible," since that's where this view ultimately leads.

There are two other passages in the Old Testament that most scholars would say have something to do with what happened in Eden in Genesis 3: Ezekiel 28:1-19 and Isaiah 14:1-22.³⁶ In those passages God taunts and pronounces judgment on the kings of Tyre and Babylon, respectively. To drive the point home that these kings deserve judgment, the inspired prophet compares them to the supernatural being (a spectacular "cherub" in Ezekiel 28, and "Lucifer, son of the dawn" in Isaiah 14) whose contemptuous pride resulted in a failed coup against God.

Notice that these passages refer to a divine being, *not* a "serpent." And that gets to the heart of the issue. In both these passages, the primeval enemy of God, the being who causes the fall of humankind into sin, is *not* a snake but some sort of supernatural being. And it is absolutely certain the event referred to in Ezekiel 28 is that of Genesis 3, since Ezekiel 28:13 mentions Eden and the garden.

Those who wish to argue that Lucifer appeared as a snake must cope with the fact that there isn't a single biblical text that says Lucifer (or any other divine being) can change into an animal. At best, this "solution" is simply a convenient escape hatch. And even if there was such biblical evidence, it still doesn't answer why Lucifer would need or choose to speak to Eve

as a snake, or why Eve wasn't surprised. Having Lucifer appear or possess a snake actually complicates matters, since this view still means that *prior* to this assumed appearance or possession snakes didn't talk. Put another way, if Lucifer's presence in the snake is the explanation for its speaking ability, then snakes didn't talk before this happened. Eve still should have been shocked when the alleged snake started the conversation. So the question remains: Who or what spoke to Eve—a literal snake, a member of the animal kingdom, or a supernatural being?

Animal, Vegetable, Mineral...Or Something Else?

Fortunately, there's a simple answer for all this, but you might want to sit down first. The reason why Eve wasn't shocked that a snake was talking to her is because she wasn't talking to a snake. She was talking to a luminous divine being and not an animal of any kind. That being may have had some sort of serpentine appearance, but he was not a snake from the animal kingdom. To make my case to you we'll need to do two things: (1) recall the ancient backdrop for the descriptions of the garden of Eden that I noted in the last chapter; and (2) look at Genesis 3, Ezekiel 28, and Isaiah 14 *very* closely. We'll start with the ancient backdrop.

In the last chapter I briefly sketched how the descriptions of the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis match descriptions of the location where, in both the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts, the divine council "lived" or met for business.³⁷ Council gatherings took place on a "cosmic mountain," the place where heaven and earth intersected, where divine decrees were given, and kingship was exercised. The cosmic mountain was not only described as a mountain, but was also a well-watered place, a beautiful garden.³⁸ I pointed out that Eden is described as both a well-watered garden and a mountain—and the place where Yahweh announced his decision to create humanity to his divine council. The description of Eden as a divine mountain comes from Ezekiel 28:13-14. The same chapter refers to Eden as the "seat of the gods" (*moshab elohim*). The word "seat" of course refers to the place of administration, even in our own language ("county seat"). The imagery is quite consistent. The only significant difference is that in Ezekiel the enemy of God is a shining divine being, whereas it is a serpent in Genesis. I'm arguing, of course, that this difference is only apparent.

But what about the plain wording of Genesis 3? Isn't the chapter crystal clear that the thing talking to Eve was a snake? Actually, the vocabulary is clear, but the meaning that traditional interpretation has given it is not, and has in fact produced the "snake" problem noted above. The Hebrew word translated "serpent" or "snake" in Genesis 3 is *nachash* (pronounced, *nakash*). More specifically, the word is *ha-nachash*. The prefixed "ha" is the way Hebrew denotes a definite article (the word for "the"). So *ha-nachash* may be said to mean "the *nachash*."

The word *nachash* is a very elastic term in Hebrew. It can function as a noun, a verb, or even as an adjective. When *nachash* functions as a noun it means "snake," and so the traditional translation is possible—but it yields the contradiction with Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14 noted above.³⁹ When *nachash* serves as a verb it means "to practice divination."⁴⁰ That meaning could also be possible in Genesis 3 due to the deception or going on—Lucifer claiming to have the "real" word from God. When a verb receives an article attached to it, the action of the verb

is then transformed into a person *doing* the action. Hence the word *ha-nachash* would then best be translated “the diviner.”

The third option—the adjectival meaning of *nachash*—is the solution to the contradiction problem. When *nachash* serves as an adjective, it’s meaning is “shining bronze” or “polished” (as in “shiny”). By adding the definite article to the word, *ha-nachash* would then quite easily mean “the shining one.” Angelic or divine beings are elsewhere described in the Bible as “shining” or luminous, at times with this very word, *nachash*.⁴¹ We often don’t think about how common this vocabulary of “shining brilliance” is for angels and other divine beings. The Bible abounds with descriptions of such beings as “flashing” or “as lightning,” or uses the brilliance of jewels to describe the blazing appearance of such beings. This has important ramifications for solving the “snake” problem.

What’s so significant about translating *ha-nachash* as “shining one” and not “snake” in Genesis 3? Very simply, “shining one” is the literal meaning of “Lucifer.” The name “Lucifer” is actually Latin and comes from the Latin Vulgate translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. In Isaiah 14:12, the *Hebrew* name of primeval conspirator against God is “Helel ben-Shachar”—“Shining One, son of the Dawn.” Translating *ha-nachash* as “Shining One” removes the contradiction of seeing a snake vs. a supernatural being in Eden since it provides an explicit parallel between the two passages.

We have words like this in English if you think about it. The very same noun / verb / adjective interplay is evident here:

(Noun): “The cleanup is going to take a long time.”

(Verb): “We must clean up this oil spill.”

(Adjective): “The cleanup procedures need to be followed.”

What results from this approach is that Eve was confronted by a member of the divine council “on the way to work,” so to speak. She wasn’t surprised, because she saw these beings come and go with regularity. We get the flavor of this context in Genesis 3:22. Following Adam and Eve’s sin God laments that now the two “have become as one of *us*”—the same plural language as in Genesis 1:26. Eden was the place where council was held. It just happened that on this day, one of them had a score to settle.

Personally, I think it quite possible that the choice of the word *nachash* in Genesis 3 was designed as a double entendre. The enemy of God was a shining divine being that also had a serpentine appearance. No, I’m not contradicting what I said above. Saying that Eve was speaking to a divine being of serpentine appearance is different than saying she was dealing with a snake from the animal kingdom. Ezekiel 28 supports this notion.

A Closer Look at Ezekiel and Isaiah

Neither the name “Helel” nor the word *nachash* appear in Ezekiel 28, but we do have a corresponding description of Eden’s villain. Note the underlined portions of Ezekiel 28:13-14:

13 You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. 14 You were a shining⁴² guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire⁴³ you walked.

The *point* of the description is the same as Isaiah 14 and Genesis 3. The appearance of the supernatural rebel in the garden of Eden is described with brilliant, shining jewels. The description of this shining being as “shining, guardian cherub” points to a serpentine appearance for this divine being, and therefore another parallel to Genesis 3. It is common among Bible scholars to suppose that the cherubim were sphinx-like creatures, based primarily on some carved depictions of thrones from Egypt and Phoenicia. Certain carvings portray thrones that are, as in Ezekiel 1, supported by creatures with wings and four faces. This perspective, while possible, isn’t terribly coherent in Ezekiel 28. It cannot account for why the being in Eden—and so parallel to the entity in Genesis 3—isn’t described as sphinx-like, or leonine, or having four faces. The reality is that the meaning and derivation of the Hebrew word for “cherub” is uncertain.⁴⁴ The most likely possibility is that the term refers to a spirit being who guards or blesses (praises), or which serves as the gatekeeper to the divine throne room, *without respect to physical appearance*.

Curiously—and perhaps tellingly—those beings whose station is in God’s throne room and who are portrayed in the Old Testament as praising God in the throne room do have a serpentine appearance (Isaiah 6). These beings are known to us as *seraphim*. Decades ago scholars believed that the word *saraph* (the plural is *seraphim*) meant “burning one” or “fiery one” since there was a Hebrew verb of that spelling with that meaning. However, the common Hebrew noun *saraph* means “serpent.” Numbers 21:8 is but one of the more obvious examples of this word and that meaning. For our purposes, *seraphim* were not mere snakes from the animal kingdom—they had hands, feet, and wings, and could speak (Isa 6:2, 6). They were apparently something both human-like and serpentine.⁴⁵ If “cherub” is merely a generic term for a being whose appointment was in the throne room of God, this would account for why the adversary of Eve in Eden is described with that term and yet as *nachash* in Genesis 3.

But what about the curses of Genesis 3? Surely those rule out a translation of “Shining One” and help us salvage the traditional view, despite its problems. This approach is a bit misguided, since the curses describe the *nachash* in terms of what he would be *after* he was punished, not before. In fact, the curses make far more sense if they are directed at a fallen divine being than a mere snake. Why? Let me point out a couple of the most apparent reasons.

First, consider the cursing of the *nachash* with respect to Eve. God tells the *nachash* that there will be “enmity” or some sort of adversarial relationship between the offspring of Eve (human beings, not necessarily female) and the offspring of the *nachash*. What are we to make of this if the *nachash* is only a snake from the animal kingdom? Commentators have danced around that issue for millennia. The fact is that all humans do not hate or fear snakes, and snakes do not by nature exist to attack or harass humans.

In Gen. 3:14 we read that God curses the *nachash* to eat dust all the days of his life. Snakes do not eat dirt as a means of sustenance, and so the curse is not meant to be taken literally. This of course has given rise to the notion that before the Fall snakes were upright animals—an idea for which I have even seen some Christian commentators appeal to evolutionary biology! If this kind of literalism is brought to the passage, then one is pressed to answer questions like: “How do we know which parts of the curse are figurative and which are literal?”; “In what way is it the worst curse to crawl on the ground? (“cursed are you above all livestock”). Other creatures crawl on their belly, and so their “fate” is at least as bad. And there are worse fates in the animal kingdom. Some creatures live only to be eaten by others. I would suggest that snakes were created by God the way we know them today and that their method of propulsion has nothing to do with what happened in Genesis 3.

Lastly, in case you’re still stuck on the first verse of Genesis 3, I need to let you in on a secret. Check a variety of English translations on Genesis 3:1. Many will have something like, “Now the serpent was craftier than any of the other beasts of the field . . .” Surely the fact that Genesis 3:1 says “the other beasts” means that the serpent was an animal, right? I could agree with that, but the secret is that the word “other” isn’t in the Hebrew text! It’s supplied by translators interpretively. The text literally says, “Now the serpent was craftier than any beasts of the field,” to which I say, no kidding—he was a divine being, so he ought to be smarter! Rather than argue in favor of the *nachash* being a snake, a member of the animal kingdom, Genesis 3:1 implies that the *nachash* was a superior being.

Frankly, I think a more serious question in all this should be put to those who want a snake in the garden: “How can this curse in Genesis 3:14 be reconciled with the punishment of Eden’s divine rebel described in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28?” A look at the passages below will tell you immediately that there is nothing like what is traditionally imagined in Genesis 3 in these other Eden passages. In Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 the rebel is punished by banishment to “Sheol” (the Hebrew place of the dead and punishment, see below) or being “cast to the earth.” These descriptions are hopelessly irreconcilable with Genesis 3 if one has an animal, a snake, in view. Note the specific underlined punishments:

Isaiah 14:9-15

- 9 “Sheol from beneath is excited over you to meet you when you come;
It arouses for you the spirits of the dead, all the leaders of the earth;
It raises all the kings of the nations from their thrones.
- 10 “They will all respond and say to you,
‘Even you have been made weak as we,
You have become like us.
- 11 ‘Your pomp *and* the music of your harps
Have been brought down to Sheol;
Maggots are spread out *as your bed* beneath you
And worms are your covering.’
- 12 “How you have fallen from heaven,
O Shining One, son of the dawn!
You have been cut down to the earth,

- You who have weakened the nations!
- 13 “But you said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
And I will sit on the mount of assembly
In the heights of the north.
- 14 ‘I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.’
- 15 “Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol,
To the recesses of the pit.

Ezek 28:2, 8-9, 13-17

- 2 “Son of man, say to the leader of Tyre, ‘Thus says the Lord God,
“Because your heart is lifted up
And you have said, ‘I am a god,
I sit in the seat of gods
In the heart of the seas’;
Yet you are a man and not God,
Although you make your heart like the heart of God—
- 8 ‘They will bring you down to the pit,
And you will die the death of those who are slain
In the heart of the seas.
- 9 ‘Will you still say, “I am a god,”
In the presence of your slayer,
Though you are a man and not God,
In the hands of those who wound you?
- 13 “You were in Eden, the garden of God;
Every precious stone was your covering:
The ruby, the topaz and the diamond;
The beryl, the onyx and the jasper;
The lapis lazuli, the turquoise and the emerald;
And the gold, the workmanship of your settings and sockets,
Was in you.
On the day that you were created
They were prepared.
- 14 “You were the anointed cherub who covers,
And I placed you *there*.
You were on the holy mountain of God;
You walked in the midst of the stones of fire.
- 15 “You were blameless in your ways
From the day you were created
Until unrighteousness was found in you.

- 16 “By the abundance of your trade
You were internally filled with violence,
And you sinned;
Therefore I have cast you as profane
From the mountain of God.
And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub,
From the midst of the stones of fire.
- 17 “Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;
You corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor.
I cast you to the ground;
I put you before kings,
That they may see you.

I take the curses that result from the fall of humankind metaphorically. Again, I do not mean they aren't real and didn't happen. I mean that we are dealing with something cosmic in the curses, not something so mundane as the posture of snakes. As you'll note from the passages above from Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, the rebellion of the Shining One was basically due to pride. What you likely do not realize is that these passages (almost every verse) are crammed with divine council vocabulary and motifs present in the ancient literature of surrounding Near Eastern cultures.

For starters, let's go to Isaiah 14:13-14, noting the underlining:

‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly in the heights of the north. ‘I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’

There's a lot to be gleaned here.⁴⁶ We've already seen in Chapter 3 that the title “Most High” refers to either the ultimate sovereign of the council (Yahweh) or his vice regent who effectively runs the cosmos for Him (the Son, or Jesus as we discover in the New Testament). We also saw there that “stars of God” is another term for the *bene elohim* of the divine council (cf. Job 38:6-8). Helel, the Shining One, vows to displace God and Jesus from rulership over the council so he can take control of the heavens and the earth. We learn here that the place of this rulership is “above the heights of the clouds.” The phrase “mount of assembly” is a very common reference to the divine assembly, the heavenly council, as its location “in the heights of the north.” Isaiah 14 is explicitly clear that what was going on (in Eden no less, via the parallel text Ezekiel 28) was an attempted coup of the divine council.

The punishment meted out in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 seems curious. The text seems to simultaneously suggest that Helel would be sent to Hell as it were, but also the earth. This is no contradiction, since the common word for “earth” in Hebrew (*erets*) is also used to denote the place under the earth where the dead await judgment.⁴⁷ We'll say a good deal more about this place in succeeding chapters. For now just realize that there is no contradiction; it's a double entendre. Helel lost his job in the divine council throne room and was sent to the *erets*, earth—and here is where the curses of Genesis 3 help us to make sense of all this. Helel wanted to be

above all created things as their lord, but God punished him to a geographically lower region. By being sent to earth (*erets*), he was lower than heaven—but there's more. He was also sent to Sheol, the Pit (*erets*), where he would (literally) be under any under creature in the animal kingdom. It's about as far down as God could put him! Note how Genesis 3, Isaiah 14, and Ezekiel 28 are conceptually unanimous on these ideas:

Genesis 3 – The *nachash* (Shining One) is “put down on the ground” (denoted by the “eating dust” reference in 3:14)

Isaiah 14 – Helel (Shining One) is “brought down to Sheol” (v. 11); “cut down to the earth [*erets*]” (v. 12); “thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit” (v. 15).

Ezekiel 28 – The brilliant shining cherub is “cast from the [cosmic] mountain of God” (v. 16) and “cast to the ground [*erets*]” (v. 17)

Implications

What all this means is that there is no contradiction between these passages. The vocabulary and metaphors dovetail. All three have a shining supernatural being in Eden who rebelled against God, who sought to usurp the headship of the divine council, who was cast from God's presence, and who was placed beneath the created things he vowed to rule, sentenced to the domain of the Underworld. There is no need to posit talking animals, universal fear of snakes, or a literal diet of dirt for those snakes. Everything falls together if the “snake” viewpoint is set aside. The old enemy, whose name eventually became known to us as Satan, had been “transformed as an angel [messenger] of light” (2 Cor 11:14).

We know the tragedy that occurred in the wake of this rebellion. Eve was deceived and, together with Adam, plunged humanity into a sinful state. But again there is more at play here. While it is true that Helel wanted rulership of the council, there was another goal. He knew it was God's intention to make humankind his imagers, members of his divine council, and to give them authority over earth, the place where council met. Humans were therefore a threat, pure and simple. The only solution was to eliminate them, but he didn't dare do that himself. Despite being “a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44), God had to make that decision—and he would make that decision if they sinned against him. Or so Helel thought.

Adam and Eve did sin of course, but God reacted in a way Helel did not anticipate. He gave them another chance. While the humans were driven from the garden of Eden, they at least were not killed. Moreover, God instituted a means by which their transgression could be atoned for. One day, some human child of Eve (Gen 3:15) would undo the effects of their fall. And as Paul informs us much later, this seed or offspring was Christ (Gal. 3:15-16). The divine vice regent of Yahweh's council would one day be born of human flesh, pay the penalty for our sin, and rise again so that we could regain our status as children of God, rulers with him in his council over all that is his.

Interestingly enough, something like this reconstruction of the Shining One's motives has survived from antiquity. Although I don't consider the book inspired, the Jewish book called

The Life of Adam and Eve, written prior to the days of Jesus, describes a conversation between Adam and the devil concerning why it was that the latter had come to hate the former so virulently. I think it gives us a bit of insight into what Helel no doubt considered a slight when humankind was given earthly dominion and council status. The conversation is preserved in chapters 12-16 (Charles' translation):⁴⁸

12 ¹ And with a heavy sigh, the devil spake: 'O Adam! all my hostility, envy, and sorrow is for thee, since it is for thee that I have been expelled from my glory, which I possessed in the heavens in the midst of the angels and for thee was I cast out in the earth.' ² Adam answered, 'What dost thou tell me?' ³ What have I done to thee or what is my fault against thee? Seeing that thou hast received no harm or injury from us, why dost thou pursue us?'

13 ¹ The devil replied, 'Adam, what dost thou tell me? It is for thy sake that I have been hurled from that place. ² When thou wast formed, I was hurled out of the presence of God and banished from the company of the angels. When God blew into thee the breath of life and thy face and likeness was made in the image of God, Michael also brought thee and made (us) worship thee in the sight of God; and God the Lord spake: Here is Adam. I have made thee in our image and likeness.'

14 ¹ And Michael went out and called all the angels saying: 'Worship the image of God as the Lord God hath commanded.' ² And Michael himself worshipped first; then he called me and said: 'Worship the image of God the Lord.' ³ And I answered, 'I have no (need) to worship Adam.' And since Michael kept urging me to worship, I said to him, 'Why dost thou urge me? I will not worship an inferior and younger being (than I). I am his senior in the Creation, before he was made was I already made. It is his duty to worship me.'

15 ¹ When the angels, who were under me, heard this, they refused to worship him. ² And Michael saith, 'Worship the image of God, but if thou wilt not worship him, the Lord God will be wrath with thee.' ³ And I said, 'If He be wrath with me, I will set my seat above the stars of heaven and will be like the Highest.'

16 ¹ And God the Lord was wrath with me and banished me and my angels from our glory; and on thy account were we expelled from our abodes into this world and hurled on the earth. ² And straightway we were overcome with grief, since we had been spoiled of so great glory. ³ And we were grieved when we saw thee in such joy and luxury. ⁴ And with guile I cheated thy wife and caused thee to be expelled through her (doing) from thy joy and luxury, as I have been driven out of my glory.'

The basic reason for Helel's hostility was that he refused to worship the human imager of God. And why should he, in light of Psalm 8:5? That verse tells us that humanity was created "a little lower than the *elohim*." Your translation probably says "a little lower than the angels," but the word translated angels there is actually *elohim*—just like in Psalm 82. The picture that emerges is that humans were by nature inferior to the plural *elohim* rulers of Yahweh's council, and yet God held his human imagers in such high esteem that he not only desired them to be his spiritual children, but wanted the non-human members of the council to acknowledge an inferior status to them!

You may be thinking that the *elohim* of Psalm 8 might be singular; that is, the verse might mean that humans were created "a little lower than God." That's certainly possible, but it isn't the way the inspired author of the book of Hebrews took it. Hebrews 2:5-8 (ESV) reads:

⁵ Now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. ⁶ It has been testified somewhere, "What is man, that you are mindful of him,

or the son of man, that you care for him? ⁷ You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, ⁸ putting everything in subjection under his feet.” Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.

The author of Hebrews is quoting a translation we’ve already bumped into in this book: the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was available in Jesus’ day, the Septuagint. It is clear from the quotation that the translator considered the *elohim* of Psalm 8:5 to be a plural. Amazingly, he makes the point that the deity vice regent himself, when he became a human being, was “for a little while” lower in status than the other members of the divine council. And yet we know that his essence was unchanged, since he is referred to as the *monogenes* during his time on earth.⁴⁹

There was one more loss for Adam and Eve that deserves attention. Prior to their fall from grace Adam and Eve had what I’d call contingent immortality. That is, they were not eternal (they had a beginning), but they would live on indefinitely given certain conditions. The conditions were pretty simple: don’t sin; eat of the Tree of Life; and don’t do something stupid that’ll get you killed. The first of those conditions probably sound familiar to you and are quite apparent from the text. If Adam and Eve sinned, God had told them, they would “surely die.” After their sin we find that God’s warning did not mean instant death, but separation from God and the inexorable aging of their bodies toward death. I’m also guessing that most readers would have no objection to my contention that this dying process was linked to separation from Eden and the tree of life. If it had no connection to their life continuing, and if it was “normal” food, why call it the Tree of Life?

My own view goes beyond this, however. I believe that it was necessary for Adam and Eve to eat of the Tree of Life to remain immortal. In other words, eating of that tree was part of how they could avoid aging and dying—which means they *could* have died before the fall. And that brings me to the third condition. We’re all used to believing that Adam and Eve were fully human, but we often don’t think about what that means. If Adam and Eve were genuine humans, they had to eat, drink, and breathe. If they *had* to do those things, that means they could die. If Adam and Eve would have bled if they cut themselves (and on what grounds would we presume they wouldn’t have bled?), then they could have injured themselves badly enough to die.

I hope you get the point, especially since it helps explain things like the Tree of Life and why it was so necessary to remove them from Eden once they had sinned. Once God decided not to kill them on the spot for their sin, if Adam and Eve had been allowed to remain in the garden of Eden with access to the Tree of Life, God’s initial declaration that they would die would have been jeopardized. They could have lived on and suspended their own judgment indefinitely. They had to be removed so their punishment could begin. And to compound the penalty, sustaining themselves physically would now be exponentially harder outside of Eden.

What questions must have gone through the minds of Adam and Eve as they looked back at Eden, now forbidden re-entry by the divine sentry! As they trudged off to start over outside

God's paradise, having lost the birthright of immediate, experiential rulership in God's council, a million thoughts must have plagued them. What did Yahweh mean that there would be an ongoing, adversarial relationship between our offspring and the offspring ("seed") of the *nachash*? What did the *nachash* think when he heard that? He was right there—did he understand what it meant? If he did and didn't like the news was he still a threat?

Eve couldn't possibly have understood what the answers to these questions would be, and neither did her immediate children. We have the benefit of looking back at how it all played out. To appreciate the rest of the Old Testament we must walk the path humanity took just after being driven from Eden. It is no understatement to say that the events of Genesis 3-11, recast against the backdrop of the divine council and the person of the *nachash*, define and lay bare what's going on in the rest of the Old Testament. Helel did indeed understand the words of Yahweh. It didn't take him long to act on that knowledge, either.

³⁶ I am well aware of the scholarly skepticism (even on the part of evangelicals) who would argue that these passages have nothing to do with Genesis 3 and the serpent. In my view, this is an excellent example of how evangelicals have dismissed the supernatural and neglected comparative ancient material in their treatment of these passages. See www.themyththatistrue.com for a more lengthy, technical discussion of the reasons that this skepticism is unwarranted and incorrect.

³⁷ Incidentally, all this descriptive language and more is used later in the Old Testament to describe the more familiar cosmic mountains where God "lived" or could be found: Sinai and Zion. We'll get to those remarkable descriptions and their relationship to the divine council later in the book.

³⁸ See www.themyththatistrue.com. For example, in the religion of ancient Syria (called Ugarit in antiquity), a country that borders Israel to the north, the high god El and his council met to govern the cosmos at the "source of the two rivers" in the "midst of the fountains of the double-deep."

³⁹ Examples of "snake" as the obvious translation in context are Number 21:6, 9.

⁴⁰ Examples would be II Kings 21:6; Gen 30:27; Gen 44:5.

⁴¹ See Dan. 10:6; Ezek 1:14-16, 21ff.; 10:9; Rev. 1:14-15.

⁴² The word I translate here as "shining" is typically translated "anointed." That translation is based on the assumption that the Hebrew word (*mimshach*) comes from the root *mashach* (the common word for "anointed one" or "messiah"). This is not the only possible root word. Given the rest of the description in 28:13 (the jewels) the word more likely comes from an Akkadian term which means "to shine" or "to sparkle" (hence, "You were the *shining* guardian cherub...").

⁴³ The phrase "stones of fire" is enigmatic to commentators. They are considered by many to be personified precious stones (hence "stones of fire" would refer to other shining divine beings among whom "the shining cherub" worked or held council). A similar description of the divine council meeting place is found in the book of I Enoch (I Enoch 14-18; cf. 17:1-3; 18:6-9).

⁴⁴ See www.themyththatistrue.com for a detailed discussion of the word "cherub" and this issue.

⁴⁵ The word usually translated "signet ring" or "signet of perfection" (ESV) in Ezek. 28:11 may actually come from a Semitic word for "serpent." Genesis 3 (and Ezekiel) may thus have a double entendre in view: a shining being of serpentine appearance.

⁴⁶ See www.themyththatistrue.com for the detailed evidence and explanation.

⁴⁷ For example, the underworld was considered the "land" of the dead (cf. Job 10:21-22; Jer 17:13; Jonah 2:7; Psa 71:20; Isa. 63:10).

⁴⁸ *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, (ed. Robert Henry Charles; Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004), 2:136.

⁴⁹ Jesus is also referred to with other vice regent terms during his life, making his deity clear. We'll hit the other terms in later chapters.

Chapter 7

The Bad Seed

As enigmatic as God’s statement to Eve had been—that her offspring or “seed” would be at odds with the offspring or “seed” of Helel, the rebel *nachash*—things get even stranger. Before we jump into what is arguably one of the oddest passages in the Bible, we need to get a handle on what exactly is meant by “the seed of the *nachash*.”

One thing to note right away is that we don’t read about the descendants of Eve battling or cringing before snakes. Instead we read about the resolute spread of evil over the earth. Adam and Eve’s eldest son, Cain, murders his younger brother Abel. A few generations later a man named Lamech is identified as a polygamist and thug. Things eventually get so bad that in Genesis 6:5 we read, “the wickedness of humankind had multiplied over the earth, so that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was continually evil.” Not exactly a ringing endorsement of those whom God originally intended to be his co-rulers on earth.

What does the spread of the human malignancy of sin have to do with the seed of the *nachash* and its antagonism toward the human seed, the seed of Eve? Since the *nachash* was not merely a snake, one could read Genesis 3:15 as describing two literal lines or groups that would come to hate each other after the Fall—one human and one divine. But the evil described shortly after Genesis 3 is human-to-human, people acting wickedly toward other people, and so the *nachash* doesn’t seem to be part of this, at least in terms of having a literal lineage that sought to harm humans. Does Gen 3:15 forecast that other divine beings would come along who, like the *nachash*, would be hostile toward humans? Or are “the seed of the *nachash*” wicked people?

The answer to both questions is *yes*, and they are not mutually contradictory. The cryptic phrase “the seed of the *nachash*” refers both to wicked humans who would live in opposition to God and those who would follow God, and divine beings who would rebel against God as Helel did, with disastrous results for humanity. But in addition to that, it also refers to a situation God knew would arise that would constitute a direct threat to the promise he gave in Genesis 3:15, that one particular offspring of Eve would eventually undo the effects of the Fall. There’s a lot to unpack here, and some of it will seem quite strange. Mythic storytelling—the unraveling of a narrative that claims direct divine activity in the world of humankind—often is. Such is the Bible. Let’s start with a few things that might be familiar.

Rather than “seed of the *nachash*” it may be best to think of the phrase “seed of Helel” (or, “seed of the devil”) instead. Although we’re talking about the same individual, this adjustment in focus is helpful. We’re used to the thought of the devil or Helel having “spiritual seed” in the form of people who oppose God’s will. In a pretty blunt use of this kind of phrase, Jesus told a group of scribes and Pharisees who were rejecting him, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44, ESV). Matthew has Jesus referring to the same group as “serpents” and a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 23:33). Writing in one of his later

letters, the apostle John makes an interesting connection between being “children of the devil” and the evil committed by Cain:

⁸ Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. ¹⁰ By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. ¹¹ For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹² We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous. (I John 3:8-12, ESV)

John’s point is that those whose lives are characterized by wickedness are “in the tradition of Cain” and are “children of the devil.” As those who are “born of God” are “children of God,” so, by implication, the “children of the devil” are “born of the devil.” This kind of expression also occurs in the Old Testament in a more peripheral way, where Gentile hording armies, the enemies of Israel, are described with serpentine vocabulary.⁵⁰

We know the language John uses here refers to a *spiritual* lineage since the children of God have “God’s seed” abiding in them, a reference to the Holy Spirit which gives us the life of God. Peter echoes the same thought in I Peter 1:23, where he describes those born again (literally, born “from above”), as being born not as mortal offspring or seed, but of “imperishable seed,” through the word of God. The opposite implication is that evildoers do not have the Spirit and are under the control of their spiritual father, the devil—Helel, the *nachash*. Because of the effect of the Fall, no human is part of the family of God until the atoning work of Christ is applied to them. We’ll hit this again in another chapter when we talk about what it really means that believers are called “sons of God.”

But there was something more literal or physical foreshadowed in God’s warning to Eve. God knew that Helel’s rebellion would not only affect the behavior of humanity; it would also embolden members of the divine council. The ripple effect of evil would extend to the cosmic mountain.

Genesis 6:1-4 is one of those texts that, for many, is best left alone. Many contemporary evangelical Bible scholars have gone to great lengths to strip the “mythology” out of it (i.e., the supernatural elements) so as to make it more palatable. But one has to wonder how bending supernatural language to human reason is consistent with the testimony of affirming a supernatural worldview. The passage I’m talking about reads:

¹ When humankind began to multiply upon the face of the earth and daughters were born to them, ² the sons of God saw the daughters of humankind, that they were attractive. And they took for themselves as wives any that they chose. ³ Then the LORD said, “My Spirit will not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.” ⁴ The giants (Hebrew, *nephilim*) were on the earth in those

days, and also afterward, whenever the sons of God came in to the daughters of humankind and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.

There are few passages in either testament that raise as many questions as this one. In fact, there are so many that it will take two chapters to address them all. Who are the sons of God? Are they divine or human? If divine, how could they have sexual relations with human women and produce children? Were the nephilim really giants? These are the obvious issues, but we should add a few more that link these four verses to the comments in Genesis 3:15, the statement about the extent of sin in Genesis 6:5, and the great Flood (Gen 6-9): Was this sexual union evil? If it was, why does it seem that only the humans get blamed for the evil, and punished by the Flood? If every living person was wiped out by the Flood, how is it that there were giants (*nephilim*) on the earth *after* the Flood, like verse four says? Just how did things get so bad on earth, and what do these four verses have to do with it? Is there some sort of cause and effect being suggested?

These questions are usually dispensed with by arguing that the sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4 are merely human beings—men from the line of Seth, Adam and Eve’s son who was born after Cain murdered Abel (Gen 4:25-26; 5:3-4).⁵¹ The explanation is offered that these four verses in Genesis 6 describe forbidden intermarriage between the godly men of Seth’s lineage and the ungodly women of Cain’s line. This logic is based on Genesis 4:26, where we read that after Seth’s birth “men began to call on the name of the Lord” (ESV). Everyone that lived on earth ultimately came from these two lines (they were Adam and Eve’s children), and this is allegedly the way the Bible distinguished the godly versus the ungodly. After Cain killed Abel, so we are told, the line of Seth remained separate and faithful from Cain’s evil brood. The marriages of Genesis 6:1-4 erased this separation and incurred the wrath of God in the Flood.

If this sounds workable to you, you aren’t alone. What I’ll call the “Sethite explanation” has been the majority view of this passage since the beginning of the fifth century A.D. In reality, though, like the de-mythologizing of Psalm 82, it creates significant theological problems and is internally contradictory. You might be thinking the alternative isn’t much better, but it is. The supernatural view requires only that we believe that supernatural beings exist and can interact physically with human beings. This can be easily demonstrated and the objections readily handled by paying close attention to the text. The Sethite view, on the other hand, ultimately puts doctrines like inspiration and inerrancy in peril, and forces us to conclude that salvation in ancient times was tied to lineage and gender. It also requires denying the literal view of Genesis 6 its historical heritage in Judaism and the early church.

Exposing the deficiencies of the Sethite explanation isn’t difficult. Some of its problems are immediately evident. First, Genesis 4:26 never says the only people who “called on the name of the Lord” were men from Seth’s lineage, nor does it say that Seth’s birth produced some sort of spiritual revival. This is an idea brought to the text from the imagination of the interpreter. Second, if these marriages are human-to-human, how is it that giants (*nephilim*) were the result of the unions?⁵² Third, the text never calls the women “daughters of Cain.” Rather, they are “daughters of men [humankind].” Fourth, nothing in Genesis 6:1-4 or anywhere else in the Bible identifies those who come from Seth’s lineage with the descriptive phrase “sons of God.”

This also is brought into the passage because of the perceived need to avoid the supernaturalism in the text.

There are many more, perhaps less obvious, problems with the Sethite explanation. I noted in Chapter 2 that the phrase “sons of God” (*bene [ha] elohim*) throughout the Old Testament refers to divine beings.⁵³ Proponents of the Sethite explanation typically reference passages where *similar* phrases refer to humans to support their view. For example, in Isaiah 43:6 God refers to human beings as his “sons” and “daughters.” In Hosea 1:10 God tells the unfaithful Israelites that after they are punished for their sin, one day in the future he will again call them “sons of the living God.” These verses appear to help the Sethite explanation, but they actually undermine its presuppositions. Neither passage connects the vocabulary to the line of Seth, nor is the language restricted to males. The point of these passages is that *believers* are God’s children, and if we take that back to Genesis 6, we are forced to conclude that the passage is teaching that only Sethite males were believers—and only Cainite women were unbelievers. The logic is strained, to say the least, and perhaps sexist.

A close reading of Genesis 6:1-4 makes it clear that a contrast is being created between the sons of God and the daughters of humankind. Here is the passage again, with two types of underlining to draw out the contrast:

¹ When humankind began to multiply upon the face of the earth and daughters were born to them, ² the sons of God saw the daughters of humankind, that they were attractive. And they took for themselves as wives any that they chose. ³ Then the LORD said, “My Spirit will not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.” ⁴ The giants (Hebrew, *nephilim*) were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, whenever the sons of God came in to the daughters of humankind and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.

Put another way, the text has humankind producing only *daughters*. The point is that *sons* are not mentioned as offspring of humankind. When the word “sons” is introduced, it is always qualified with the phrase “of God,” and not connected to the human childbearing of Genesis 6:1.

One could object here that it isn’t fair to argue that since the word “sons” isn’t used with the word “humankind” a deliberate contrast is intended between the two groups (one human, one divine). One could say that we’re all children of God in some sense. God made humans, so we are all his offspring, as Paul says in Acts 17:22-29. That’s true, but the person who wants to believe the Sethite explanation cannot use this as a way to avoid the contrast. Saying that we are all God’s children so as to erase the contrast undermines the very basis for the Sethite explanation. If *everyone* is human in Genesis 6:1-4 and the “divine language” is used only because all humans are God’s children, then *why do we need to restrict the godliness to Seth’s line?* Why view the marriages as evil at all? Why view them as violating any boundary God laid out for marriage?

In point of fact, there is no indication in Genesis or anywhere else in the Bible that human beings had been given any marriage laws before the Flood. The biblical text compels the

conclusion that prior to the Flood there were no marriage prohibitions of the kind that came with Moses. There was no “Israel” and no “Gentiles.” Moreover, the Bible is clear that some of marital practices forbidden under the law Moses were allowed at this time. For example, intermarriage of close relatives was allowed. This is the only coherent explanation for where Cain got his wife and how population increased in the early history of humanity. Given these facts, why would we expect that any other marriage law given later in Israel’s history was in effect before the Flood? The assumed intermarriage prohibition has to be inserted into the story for the sake of the Sethite explanation. The reasoning is entirely circular.

Particularly damaging to the Sethite view is the fact that *the sons of Seth do not survive the Flood*. If the Sethite males were so godly, how is it that they perished? Did God punish the innocent with the guilty? The implication is that the sons of Seth were *included* in the statement of Genesis 6:5 (“the wickedness of humankind had multiplied over the earth, so that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was continually evil”) and *excluded* from God’s grace in Genesis 6:8 (“But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord”).

In point of fact, there is simply no evidence from the biblical text that the line of Seth (wholly or in the greater part) in Noah’s day was godly.⁵⁴ Only Noah and his immediate family were saved from death. There is no usefulness in the observation that Noah was in the line of Seth, either (Gen 5; Luke 3:36-38). This would force the Sethite proponent to admit that all the *other* sons of Seth were ungodly and perished in the Flood, which in turn requires the conclusion that the entire group of the “sons of God” (sons of Seth) in Genesis 6:1-4 amounted to only four people—Noah and his sons! But that would mean that Noah and his sons, as the sons of God, were the ones committing the sin of intermarriage. And that option brings the incoherence of the Sethite view full circle: Why then weren’t Noah and his sons condemned to die in the Flood if *they* were the ones committing the sin of intermarriage? Why would they have been spared?

As hopeless as the Sethite explanation is with respect to the Old Testament material, it’s most serious problems only surface once you get into the New Testament. Two passages are especially relevant to what happened in Genesis 6:1-4. I have again underlined items for observation and discussion:

II Peter 2:1-10 (ESV)

¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. ² And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³ And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. ⁴ For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; ⁵ if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; ⁶ if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; ⁷ and if he rescued

righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked ⁸ (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); ⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, ¹⁰ and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.

Jude 5-7 (ESV)

⁵ Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. ⁶ And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day— ⁷ just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Several things are immediately apparent with respect to these passages. They are undoubtedly about the same subject:

II Peter 2	Jude
"God did not spare the angels . . ."	". . . the angels who . . ."
". . . when they [the angels] sinned . . . [and] despise authority . . ."	". . . did not stay within their own position of authority but left their proper dwelling . . ."
". . . cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment . . ."	". . . kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day . . ."
". . . by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example . . ."	". . . just as Sodom and Gomorrah . . . serves as an example . . ."
". . . follow their sensuality . . . distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked . . . who indulge in the lust of defiling passion . . ."	". . . indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire . . ."

The Jude account does not contain the reference to Noah and the Flood present in the II Peter version (v. 5), but it is perfectly apparent that both versions are referencing the same episode. It is completely clear that this episode involved "angels" and a decision those divine beings made to despise some sort of divinely-ordained boundary ("authority"; "proper dwelling"). The II Peter accounting securely and certainly situates this sin at the time of Noah and the Flood ("For if God did not spare angels when they sinned . . . but preserved Noah . . . with seven others . . . when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly . . ."). That the type of sin committed

by the angels was sexual is clear from the vocabulary (“sensuality”; “sensual conduct”; “lust of defiling passion”; “sexual immorality”; “unnatural desire”) as well as the linkage of the angel’s sin to the Sodom and Gomorrah incident.

At this point a question is obvious: What sin are Peter and Jude referencing? There is only one possibility—the sin of Genesis 6 that precipitated the Flood of Noah. Not only is this the only conceivable match given the data in II Peter and Jude, but there is no other sin by angels recorded in the Bible that would in any way relate to Noah, the Flood or, by extension due to the sexual nature of the sin, Sodom and Gomorrah. Evangelical scholars and Bible teachers often resort to throwing up their hands and saying “we just don’t know,” postulating some angelic sin we aren’t told about in the Bible so as to avoid what appears to them an embarrassing piece of mythology in the Scriptures.⁵⁵ Inserting data into the Bible isn’t proper interpretive method.

Some readers might wonder at this point, “What about the original fall of the angels?” It may sound a bit presumptuous, but this is one of those doctrines that everyone knows about but which cannot be found in the Bible. The reasoning works like this:

1. Satan (Helel; the *nachash*) tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden;
2. Satan is an “angelic” being and ruler of the demons;
3. There are demons in other passages of the Bible.
4. Therefore, Satan and these other angels (demons) fell together prior to the Garden of Eden incident.

The problem is in the conclusion—it overextends the evidence in the Bible. If you read the Bible through completely and with close attention, you will eventually realize that the fall of what is likely a large group of angels (demons) is never described anywhere in the Bible prior to the Fall of Adam and Eve. We read of Helel in the garden and his evil. We then read Genesis 6:1-4.

This void is often filled by appeal to Revelation 12:7-9, where Satan and his angels are cast out of heaven. That passage very clearly does not refer to a pre-Flood event, though, and so is no help for this conundrum or to the Sethite explanation’s search for an angelic sin. Revelation 12 correlates this event (12:7-9) to the birth of Christ (12:1-4), the resurrection (12:5), and the plight of Israel (the woman of 12:6) leading up to the final conflict before the consummation of God’s kingdom (12:6, 10-17; see Dan. 12:1-3). Revelation 12:10 clearly links the expulsion of Satan and his angels to the work of Christ, and so the context is *post-flood*. Further, Revelation 12:11 notes that, after this expulsion, Satan knows “his time is short,” a comment that would make little sense if this referred to a pre-flood episode. Lastly, Jesus himself, when beginning his public ministry, said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18, ESV).

Returning to II Peter and Jude, these passages are important in that they demonstrate that these New Testament authors understood the sons of God of Genesis 6 not as the sons of Seth, but as supernatural beings. To deny the supernatural view of Genesis puts one in the position of suggesting that Peter and Jude, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, misunderstood the passage. This is a dangerous threat to inspiration and inerrancy, and the thought process that

leads to this crossroad is frankly driven by only one concern—avoiding what seems to be the weird circumstance of heavenly beings having sexual relations with human women.

To be fair, the weird factor is understandable. But given the mythic, supernatural worldview of the Old Testament it is not surprising. And yet we are offended at taking the text to mean what it says. We would do well to ask why we find these four verses so offensive. Do we really need to be embarrassed at the thought that divine beings could come to earth, assume corporeal flesh with all of its capabilities (and limitations), do what is described in Genesis 6:1-4? Flesh is flesh, and it seems that throughout the Old Testament it is the “required form of dress” for supernatural beings that either seek to or need to interact closely with human beings. In Genesis 18 Yahweh himself and two angels have a meal with Abraham. Supernatural beings do not need to eat, but when in flesh, they can. I’ll say more about this in the next chapter, but at this point it should be noted that all the great theological minds of the Church prior to Augustine—men like Irenaeus, Origen, and Tertullian—saw no theological problem with supernatural beings assuming flesh that had the expected capacities of flesh.⁵⁶ So did nearly every Jewish thinker in antiquity.

We know this is the case because of what we read in various ancient Jewish books outside the Bible, such as the *Book of Jubilees*, certain Dead Sea Scrolls, and *1 Enoch*. The latter is particularly significant, since certain Jewish groups (like those at Qumran) held the book of Enoch to be inspired and part of the canon. The book of Jude (v. 14) quotes from *1 Enoch*, and a number of other New Testament passages allude to parts of it.⁵⁷ *1 Enoch* was never considered inspired by the early church fathers, but many of those men considered it a valid source for history and doctrine.⁵⁸ I would agree—*1 Enoch* is not inspired, but it can provide useful insights into how we should understand the Genesis 6 episode. For example, *1 Enoch* records the decision of the sons of God (referred to as Watchers in Dead Sea Scrolls that preserve parts of *1 Enoch*):

*1 Enoch 6:1-8*⁵⁹

¹ It came to pass after the sons of men had multiplied in those days, that daughters were born to them, elegant and beautiful. ² And when the Watchers, the sons of heaven, saw them, they became infatuated with them, saying to each other, “Come, let us choose for ourselves wives from the offspring of men, and let us have children.” ³ Then their leader Shemyaza said to them, “I fear that you may not go through with this plan, ⁴ And that I alone will suffer for such a terrible crime.” ⁵ But they answered him and said, “We all swear, ⁶ And bind ourselves by mutual oaths, that we will not change our mind, but will execute our plan.” ⁷ Then they swore all together, and bound themselves by mutual oaths. The whole number of those who descended on what is the top of Mount Hermon, in the days of Jared, was two hundred. ⁸ That mountain therefore came to be Hermon, because they had sworn upon it, and bound themselves by mutual oaths.

This passage provides several interesting points that are in concert with Genesis 6:1-4. Aside from the obvious, that the account tells of beings from heaven who came to earth and cohabited with human women, we learn that the Watchers, the heavenly beings, knew from the very outset that what they desired to do was wrong. This sheds some light on Jude’s brief note about

heavenly beings and humans having a “proper” abode. We also learn that these beings came down “in the days of Jared” and descended to Mount Hermon. We will not discuss the reference to Hermon here, except to point out that the name Hermon (pronounced *khermon* in Hebrew), is formed from the Hebrew term *kherem*, which is a word that means “destruction” and is the Hebrew equivalent for Islam’s *jihad*—“holy war.” This term foreshadows the real intent of Israel’s practice of utterly destroying the populations of certain sites on their way to the Promised Land. As I will demonstrate in a later chapter, these sites were all predominantly populated by descendants of the *nephilim*, the offspring of the unions of Genesis 6:1-4.

The reference to the “days of Jared” is important because of Genesis 6:5, which describes an earth overrun with all kinds of wickedness. Jared is a name drawn from the genealogies of Genesis 5, specifically 5:18. A look back at that chapter reveals that Jared lived centuries *before* Noah. Why is this significant? Because it means that after the Watchers, the sons of God, descended, it took centuries for humanity to become corrupt to the point of God determining an event like the Flood was necessary to punish evil. There is a cause and effect relationship between the descent of the sons of God and the wickedness of humanity. The link between Genesis 6:1-4 and 6:5 that seems implied is made explicit in *1 Enoch* and other ancient texts. Individual Watchers are blamed for dispensing knowledge to humans that led to their corruption:

1 Enoch 7-8

7¹ And all the other [Watchers] took wives for themselves, and each chose for himself one, and began to go in to them and to defile themselves with them, and they taught them charms and spells, and the cutting of roots, and made them acquainted with plants . . . 8¹ And Azazel taught men to make swords, and knives, and shields, and breastplates, and revealed to them the metals [of earth] and metallurgy, and bracelets, and ornaments, and the use of crystals, and the adornment of the eyelids, and all kinds of precious gems, and all sorts of coloring makeup.² And there arose much godlessness, and they committed fornication, and they were led astray, and became corrupt in all their ways.³ Shemyaza also taught them the use of drugs, and root-cuttings, Armaros taught them how to undo spells, Baraqijal taught astrology, Kokabel taught the knowledge of the constellations, and Ezeqeel taught divination by meteorology, Araquel taught geomancy, Shamsiel taught the signs of the sun, and Sariel taught the course of the moon.⁴ And as men perished, they cried, and their cry went up to heaven . . .

What humanity was taught needs to be set in context. Some, if not all, of the items in this list are not inherently evil. However all these items were utilized in some way in the pagan religions of the ancient world. The knowledge of horticulture, for example, was commonly used to produce drugs that in turn produced altered states of consciousness associated with demonic worship.⁶⁰ Astronomical knowledge became a gateway to worship the stars—which, as you may recall from Chapter 2, were associated with the sons of God of the divine council. The advent of makeup and other adornments were apparently used for seduction (hence the reference to fornication). Since the Genesis 6:1-4 episode is our only biblical reference to actual unfaithfulness on the part of the members of God’s council, it would seem this fuller picture

from other texts helps explain the odd statements in the book of Job about God “not trusting his holy ones” (Job 4:18; 15:15).⁶¹

The above passages also help answer some vexing questions, even among experts. Scholars have been puzzled as to why the Genesis 6:1-4 account seems to exclude the sons of God from blame for the Flood, focusing attention instead on humankind’s wickedness. The answer is simple, but perhaps not obvious. In the account in *I Enoch* 9-11, the offending Watchers are eventually punished in the time of Noah. Specifically, they are rounded up, chained, and imprisoned within the earth until the time of end—the final judgment that the Old Testament calls the Day of the Lord. This is where all Jewish texts—including the New Testament—have the fallen sons of God.

Recall that in Jude and II Peter we read about the punishment of the fallen sons of God:

II Peter 2:4 - For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment . . .

Jude 6 - And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.

The key term to note is “hell” in II Peter 2:4. The Greek word here is not the expected *Hades*. Rather, Peter says the fallen Watchers were sent to “Tartarus.” This Greek word is the precise term used in classical Greek myths about the ancient giants. The divine Titans were imprisoned in Tartarus, the lowest part of the underworld, by the Olympian gods Uranos, Kronos and Zeus. The connection is explicit and unmistakable.

The picture that thus emerges is that the sons of God descended in the days of Jared, in premeditated violation of God’s will that they stay in their proper dwelling. They took human women as their wives, and the act was apparently not resisted. Not only are there surviving texts that tell us this directly, but the language of Genesis 6 (“took wives”) is the normal expression used elsewhere in the Old Testament for getting married, not any sort of violent sexual act. God allowed this set of circumstances to continue for centuries, but by the time of Noah humanity had been willingly corrupted by the knowledge doled out by the Watchers.

The moral corruption of humanity was not the only reason action eventually had to be taken to rectify the situation. When the Old Testament writer tells us that only Noah and his immediate family circle were unsullied by all this, he telegraphs a specific message. The seed of the woman was not to mingle with the seed of the *nachash*, for it was the seed of the woman who would undo the effects of the Fall. Though there is no direct biblical evidence that the sons of God *intended* to pollute what we know from hindsight to be the messianic line (Jesus’ lineage runs through Noah back to Adam and Eve),⁶² the mythic narrator wants us to discern that the *result* of this co-mingling of human and celestial flesh, even if unintentional, was that the completely human seed of the woman had nearly been eclipsed. The redeemer-seed of the woman had to be completely and only human, since what was ultimately being prefigured by that pronouncement back in Eden was sacrificial death of the human incarnate Son of God. We

tend to look at the flood as the act of a vengeful, perhaps even capricious, God. Rather, it was an act of grace, born of regret (Gen. 6:6), to preserve the family of Noah and the plan of redemption. The necessary human seed could not be lost or the promise would fail.

⁵⁰ For example, Isa 14:29; 30:6; Jer 8:17; 46:22.

⁵¹ A variation of the viewpoint that the “Sons of God” in Genesis 6:1-4 are only humans has the “sons of God” as divinized human rulers. A survey of the academic literature arguing this view reveals that it depends on taking the phrase “sons of the Most High” in Psalm 82:6 and wedding it to the fact that David is referred to as a son of God (i.e., God refers to the Israelite king as “my son”). Proponents cite other ancient Near Eastern material where the king or Pharaoh is referred to in the same way. Other passages that *appear* to use the word *elohim* of humans are cited in defense (e.g., Exodus 22:7-8). Further, this view understands God’s wrath at the marriages as polygamy—that these divinized human rulers took as many wives as they wanted. We have already seen how the human view of the plural *elohim* language in Psalm 82 implodes under analysis, and so this view is rendered implausible. Proponents of this view overlook some obvious problems. First, the text of Genesis 6 never says the marriages were polygamous. That is read into the text (and specifically denied in the version of the story in *1 Enoch*). I will address the other passages where *elohim* seems to refer to humans in future chapters. Second, the examples of other human kings as sons of a god aren’t terribly helpful to the divinized human ruler view since many (even the majority) of those instances have human kingship descending from the gods by virtue of a literal cohabitation of a human wife with a god. Hence they agree with the view of Genesis 6 that takes the sons of God as divine beings. Lastly, though I will address the other passages where *elohim* seems to refer to humans in future chapters, for now it is sufficient to add that *elohim* in these verses may best be translated as “God” (the God of Israel) and not as a plural. In that case, these verses are no support to the divinized human ruler view.

⁵² See the next chapter for a brief discussion of why the term *nephilim* means “giants.”

⁵³ If Chapter 2 is no longer fresh in your mind, I’d recommend going back and reading through it again, since I’ll draw on it here. I would also recommend reading through the Appendixes relevant to that chapter again.

⁵⁴ It is common for evangelical scholars to make statements similar to the following: “Seth establishes the line of righteous antediluvians culminating with Noah in Genesis 5 and continuing to Jesus” (Richard S. Hess, “Seth,” in the Anchor Bible Dictionary [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 5:1118). But if one reads this genealogy in Genesis 5, no one except Enoch is actually described in spiritually favorable terms. We have only a genealogy and are left with only our imagination as to how these people lived and behaved. The “godliness” is inserted into the text.

⁵⁵ This is somewhat understandable, since a number of ancient cultures have a story like Genesis 6:1-4, connected to some divine judgment like a flood, where heavenly beings came to earth and fathered children—heroes, kings—by human women. See www.themyththatistrue.com.

⁵⁶ cite VanderKam here. It is worth noting that all Jewish rabbis and scholars up to the second century A.D. believed the same thing. At that point in history, the rabbis changed their position. After the advent of Christianity they saw the need to avoid having heavenly “sons of God” in their sacred books. Not coincidentally, it was at this same time that the teaching of “Two Powers in heaven” also became a heresy (Segal).

⁵⁷ See www.themyththatistrue.com for the use of Enoch in the NT.

⁵⁸ Note VanderKam here and others.

⁵⁹ The translation is my own, and incorporates readings from Aramaic Enoch scrolls from Qumran, as well as the Greek and Ethiopic texts of *1 Enoch*. As such, it may not correspond exactly to English translations available on the web or in paperback.

⁶⁰ The New Testament term *pharmakeia* (cf. English “pharmaceutical”; “pharmacy”) refers to the production of potions and drugs from various sorts of plants and other organic matter. In New Testament days the practice was often connected to sorcery. It is often translated “sorcery” or “magic” (see Rev 9:21; 18:23; 22:15).

⁶¹ Note that Job 15:15 is in a divine council context. Job 15:8 asks a rhetorical question about “standing in God’s council.” In another chapter on the Old Testament prophets I’ll point out how “standing in the council” relates to the commissioning of prophets and other spokesmen of God (cf. Jer. 23:18-22).

⁶² Luke 3:36-38.

Chapter 8

A Tall Order

The last chapter focused on the incoherence of the attempted explanations for Genesis 6:1-4 that deny anything supernatural occurred—that the sons of God were mere humans, not heavenly beings. The problems with such a view are serious. I didn't say everything I could have in that regard, though. I left out one particularly issue to which we'll now turn our attention, and issue that also provides a nice transition into the supernatural view's own perceived difficulties.

I speak here of the fact that the offspring of the sexual unions in Genesis 6:1-4 produced giants (*nephilim*). If the sons of God were mere humans, one wonders why the children born to their wives were so unusual. Those who hold the Sethite view or some variation of it contend that the *nephilim* were not actually giants. This objection is understandable, since having giants as a result of these marriages pretty much destroys the “normalcy” of what's going on in Genesis 6:1-4. As a result, opponents of the supernatural view of Genesis 6:1-4 necessarily must deny that the offspring of the sexual unions in that chapter were giants.

Establishing that the word *nephilim* means “giants” is therefore important. The simplest way to demonstrate the validity of this understanding is to say that the spelling of the word *nephilim* tells us what the word can and cannot mean. In other words, the “shape” of the Hebrew word is the key to knowing that the word means “giants.”⁶³

The word *nephilim* is actually spelled two different ways in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. As we begin our discussion of this, the first thing you need to keep in mind is that Hebrew originally had no vowels—everything was written with consonants only. I know this sounds strange, but you could actually read English this way if you had to (perhaps not with complete clarity, but you could understand a lot). For example, I'm betting you can read these sentences with little difficulty:

Snt cls s cmng t tw

Prsdnt Bsh wll spk tnght n tlvsn

Fd th dg bfr gng t schl

Th sprbwl s n xctng ftbll gm

The reason you could get through these sentences despite the absence of vowels is that you know the vocabulary of your own language very well. The same was true of Hebrew speakers and writers. Eventually, though, Hebrew scribes began to use consonants to mark vowels—certain consonants began to do “double-duty”—to help readers. English also does that. In elementary school, we learned that the vowels were “a, e, i, o, and u—and sometimes y.” The letter “y” in English can be a consonant or a vowel, and the same is true in Hebrew! The Hebrew letter for “y” (called *yod*) sometimes functions to mark a vowel sound—specifically a sound like our long “i” (pronounced “ee”) in words like “machine.” Still later on in Middle Ages, the Jewish scribes invented a vowel system of little dots and dashes to go over and under the consonants.

Now for our first observation about the word *nephilim*. Notice that the word *nephilim* has an i-vowel in the middle—*nephilim*. What you can’t see in English is that this i-vowel in the Hebrew text is sometimes marked with the consonant “y” and other times it’s not:

ne-ph-l-m (Genesis 6:4; Numbers 13:33)
ne-phy-l-m (Numbers 13:33)

You probably noticed that both spellings show up in Numbers 13:33. We’ll come back to that point, but for right now just realize that the reason is not that the biblical writer couldn’t decide how to spell it or didn’t know how to spell! Believe it or not, the presence of both spellings in that single verse is an important clue to what the *nephilim* actually were.

The second thing to note is very simple as well: the word *nephilim* ends with *-im*. This ending is the way Hebrew denotes a plural (more than one). English adds -s (“cats”), -es (“dishes”), or with some words, -ies (“babies”). Hebrew uses *-im*.

So why is the presence of that little “y” in the middle of the word *nephilim* important? Most people who deny that the *nephilim* were giants argue that the word comes from a Hebrew “root” verb spelled with the consonants: *n-ph-l* (*naphal*; “to fall”). The argument is therefore made that *nephilim* means “fallen ones” (as in spiritually evil) or “those who fall upon [someone]” (i.e., a warrior or soldier.). The tiny middle “y”, though, makes this explanation impossible. *Nephilim* cannot be a verbal form. Why? Because the middle “y” in *nephylim* tells us that the original source “root” ALSO had a middle “y” in it, and no plural verbal form in Hebrew is spelled this way.⁶⁴

When I say “no plural verbal form in Hebrew is spelled this way” you might think I’m being pretty picky about making my case. Actually, my point is an important one: language have rules, and those rules dictate what words mean. Let me illustrate from English before continuing. Hebrew is like many other languages in that it uses a basic root or group of consonants and then adds things to them into various “shapes” to form various words. For example, let’s take the “root” word “spell” in English. Note how the shape of the word is changed to make different words:

spells (could be a verb denoting an ongoing action; could also be a *noun*)

spelled (a verb of past time)
spelling (a verb of present time)
speller (a noun – one who spells)
misspell (a verb of different meaning)
spellbound (an adjective)

The same thing happens in Hebrew. There are rules for how words are formed, and those rules ought not be ignored. The claim of those who deny the *nephilim* were giants on the basis that the word is some sort of verbal form can be easily tested using the rules of Hebrew spelling or word formation. In Hebrew, “fallen ones” (a term formed from the Hebrew verb *naphal* / “to fall”) would be spelled *nephulim*.⁶⁵ Likewise, “those who fall upon” would be spelled *nophelim*. Even though the reader may not know Hebrew, it is perfectly obvious that neither spelling of the presumed root source *naphal* matches the term in Genesis 6 or Numbers 13:33—*nephilim*.⁶⁶

While there is no formation in Hebrew using the verb *naphal* that can account for the Hebrew spelling *nephylim* in Numbers 13:33, the rules of Hebrew word formation do allow that *nephilim* could be an *adjective* based on Hebrew *naphal*.⁶⁷ The meaning in that case would be “fallen.” While this is possible, it isn’t plausible for a very simple reason: it fails to answer why the word “nephilim” was used by the biblical writer in Numbers 13:33 for persons “of great height.” Let’s take a look at Numbers 13:33 (note the underlined portions):

³⁰ But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” ³¹ Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” ³² So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height.” ³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” (ESV)

The description in Numbers 13:33 undermines opponents of the supernatural view who argue that the word *nephilim* refers to “spiritually fallen” beings by virtue of the word being an adjective. The great height cannot be accounted for in that explanation. An appeal to *nephilim* as an adjective does nothing to overturn the supernatural view of Genesis 6:1-4.

So where does this leave us? Is there a source root for *nephilim* that accounts for the Hebrew spelling and explains the descriptions in Numbers 13:33?⁶⁸ Fortunately, there is an answer—in Aramaic. Aramaic was the language of the Babylonian people during the time in history that the Jews were taken into exile. In that language there is the noun *naphil*. The Hebrew spelling of this noun has an original middle “y”—*nphyl*, and when one adds the standard ending for plural nouns (*-im*) one gets the Hebrew spelling of the

form in Numbers 13:33, *nephylim*!⁶⁹ And what does the Aramaic word *naphil* mean? “Giant”!

This little rabbit-trail back to the Babylonian exile has another point to it. Not only did Aramaic become a common language for the Jews during the exile, but the exile was the period when the Jewish scribes assembled and polished the final form of biblical books of our Old Testament that we have today (at least everything that was written to that point, which was nearly everything).

What does this have to do with the word *nephilim*? Let’s go back to Numbers 13:33 again (with the same underlined portions):

³⁰ But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” ³¹ Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” ³² So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height.” ³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” (ESV)

If you looked up Numbers 13:33 in a commentary, you would likely find some note that the two occurrences of *nephilim* here and the material in the parentheses above in verse 33 were added later (material added by scribes is called a “gloss”). Some evangelicals argue that these additions undermine a link between the sons of Anak whom the Israelite spies encountered and the *nephilim* of Genesis 6:1-4. Supposedly, that linkage was just a later scribe’s uninformed, erroneous opinion.

It is certainly true that scribes added bits of information to help readers of their own day understand the ancient contents of the Bible. Usually this happens with geographic place names, where a scribe will give the name of a city and then add what the name used to be, thereby orienting his readers.⁷⁰ However, an appeal to scribal stupidity or naiveté seems to ignore the fact that the phrase is in biblical text by inspiration. Any such “gloss” must be viewed as part of the process of inspiration, else we have material in the Bible that really doesn’t belong there. That doctrinal problem aside, this misguided attempt to avoid the giantism of the *nephilim* fails to take into account the rest of the description that can’t be “blamed” on scribes—that the sons of Anak were “of great height” and made the Israelites feel “like grasshoppers.”

I actually think this gloss makes the giantism of the *nephilim* very clear. Look carefully at the lines in question, noting the colored detail which is evident only in the Hebrew spelling:

³³ And there we saw the Nephylim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim)...

Did you notice that only the first of these two “nephilims” has the middle “y”? I would argue that if a later scribe, writing during the time when Aramaic was in full use among the Jews, added this material, he did so *to make sure* that the readers knew that the word *nephilim* specifically came from *naphil* and meant “giants.” In fact, this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the fuller “y” spelling of *nephilim* occurs. The scribe inserted the full middle “y” spelling from the root source *naphil* (“giant”) and then explicitly linked that form, which can only mean “giant,” to the older, more ancient spelling of *nephilim* found in Genesis 6:4! The other details (“of great height”; “like grasshoppers”) solidified the point being made.

Some interpreters of Genesis 6:1-4 and Numbers 13:33 resort to the desperate argument that the statement in Numbers 13:33 was actually a *false* report of the unbelieving spies. In other words, the description of the spies that the inhabitants of the land were giants (*nephilim*) was a lie! That their report was called “bad” (ESV, v. 32) or “evil” in other translations is offered as proof for this assertion.

There is simply no exegetical foundation for this view. It is a deliberate misreading inserted into the text to avoid the presumed problem of the *nephilim*. The reason the report of the spies was called “bad” is absolutely transparent from the biblical text—the spies wanted to chicken out and refused to trust God. Nowhere in all the descriptions in the Old Testament about this episode do we read that Israel was punished for lying, or that the people had been deceived by a lying report. We read the opposite everywhere—that the people did not believe the word of Joshua and Caleb—who, by the way, did not object to the truthfulness of the report about the giants, and did not accuse the other ten spies of lying about the threat!

But if the *nephilim* were really giants, then what? It’s no surprise that a literal view of Genesis 6:1-4 as I am suggesting disturbs people—and I used to be among their number. That said, the problems are not difficult to solve if one allows for the supernatural in one’s Christian worldview. So let’s walk through the questions that are no doubt on your mind in the pages that remain in this chapter.

In the context of our recent discussions about the *nachash*, his seed, and Genesis 6:1-4, taking the *nephilim* as giants means that, aside from the “seed of the *nachash*” referring to evil people devoted to opposing God’s people and God’s plans, there was also a literal “seed of the *nachash*” that in part fulfilled the curse pronounced in the garden. I am not suggesting by this phrase that the divine sons of God of Genesis 6:1-4 were commanded by Satan to do what they did, or that they were somehow “genetically” related to Satan. The biblical text doesn’t tell us such things. For the moment I am proposing that, on one hand, the curses were worked out in the rise of evil humans who opposed God and also in the rise of “super-human” or “hybrid” physical beings who also sought to crush the people of God.

Genesis 6:1-4 is clear that these beings were human—they had human mothers—but it is equally clear that they were also divine, having divine beings as their fathers. We have

already seen that a purely human explanation for the identity of the sons of God makes little sense and is riddled with contradictions. Those problems and the inspired testimony of Peter and Jude compel us to conclude that the sons of God were divine beings. But how can heavenly beings have sexual relations with human women? And aren't these beings just spirits?

The Bible does, of course, refer to God's heavenly messengers as spirits on at least one occasion (Ps 104:4), but it is a matter of the biblical record that heavenly beings often take physical, corporeal form. In fact, I would suggest that when divine beings cross the great divide between heaven and earth to interact with human beings, the "required form of dress" appears to be *flesh*.

I am not speaking here of beings that merely appear to be physical but actually would not be solid—mere apparitions of human form. That is not what the biblical text describes on several occasions. For example, the text is quite clear that angels met with Abraham in physical, solid flesh, for they ate a meal together (Gen 18).⁷¹ In Genesis 19 these two angels are sent to Sodom and Gomorrah to retrieve Lot and his family from the impending doom pronounced by God on that city. Genesis 19:10 informs us that the two angels had to physically grab Lot and pull him back into his house to avoid molestation in Sodom, something that would be hard to do if the two beings were not truly physical!

Another example is Genesis 32:22-31, where we read that Jacob wrestled with a "man" (32:24) whom the text also describes as *elohim* twice (32:29, 31). Hosea 12:3-4 refers back to this incident and describes the being who wrestled with Jacob as *elohim* and *mal'ak* ("angel"). I'll have more to say about this particular angel in later chapters, but for now it needs to be understood that one does not wrestle with an apparition. This was a physical struggle, and one that left Jacob injured as a result of the being's touch (32:31-32).

The ultimate point made by these examples is that the two heavenly beings that ate the meal with Abraham did not *need* to eat. Immortal beings need no sustenance to extend their lives. However, the text makes it clear that they *could* do this very physical, earthy activity. This is part of the answer to the common objection that Matthew 22:23-33 teaches that angels (and therefore any other heavenly being) cannot engage in sexual intercourse. The passage reads:

²³ The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, ²⁴ saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.' ²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. ²⁶ So too the second and third, down to the seventh. ²⁷ After them all, the woman died. ²⁸ In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her." ²⁹ But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in

marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ³² ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” ³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

A couple items require attention. The text does not say angels *cannot* have sexual intercourse; it just says they *don't*. Second, Jesus' description is restricted to angels in heaven—no comment is made about what capabilities angels may or may not have when they come to earth in physical form. The idea that Jesus taught that angels cannot engage in sexual activity must be imposed on the text. The point seems to be that marriage and childbearing aren't necessary in heaven. This would make perfect sense since procreation is only necessary when the survival of the species depends on it. That isn't the case in heaven.

The real reason that this passage is used to allegedly overturn the idea that the sons of God are divine beings is that the idea of such sexual intercourse is so strange. All that is required, though, is allowing heavenly beings to assume flesh when they come to earth, and that the flesh they have assumed has the properties and capabilities of “normal” flesh. One might ask what else in the Bible is too strange for modern minds to accept. How is the virgin birth “normal”? What *isn't* mind-blowing about Jesus having both a divine and human nature fused together? For that matter, what is so ordinary about God going through the human birth process and growing and learning as any other child? Frankly, the idea that the co-regent and creator of the universe had to learn how to talk, eat with a spoon, and be “potty trained” is far more shocking than Genesis 6:1-4—and yet this is what Scripture affirms when it informs us explicitly that the second person of the godhead became a human.

Another objection to the supernatural explanation of Genesis 6:1-4 is the issue of how giants survived the flood. Many commentators who hold to a global flood in Genesis 6-8 seek to deny the giantism of the *nephilim* because they think that is necessary to preserve their view of the flood. To refresh your memory, Genesis 6:4 reads:

“The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.”

Opponents of the giant explanation seem to feel that it is easy to explain Genesis 6:4's comment about *nephilim* being on the earth after the flood if the text is only describing human warriors or evil (“fallen”) people. What could be more obvious? Of course there were great warriors or evildoers on the earth after the flood! This easy explanation, though, is its own worst enemy, for it begs the question of why the author would point something out that is so patently obvious. But if the author is again trying to link the giant clans in the Old Testament after the flood with the *nephilim* of Genesis 6:4, such a phrase makes sense.

I would argue this is exactly what is going on here. The author (or again perhaps an inspired editor/scribe during the exile) knows that his readers will encounter giants elsewhere in the biblical stories (e.g., the sons of Anak in Num 13:33, Og of Bashan in Deut 3, and Goliath in I Sam 17-18). Ancient readers would find this odd since the giant *nephilim* were supposedly wiped out in the great flood. The writer had to give his readers some explanation for why there were giants after the flood when only Noah and his family survived.⁷²

There are basically three options for explaining the comment in Genesis 6:4 and the presence of giants after the flood if one takes the view that the *nephilim* were indeed giants: (1) the Flood of Genesis 6-8 was in fact localized and not global; (2) the survivors of the flood, Noah and his family, somehow carried the genetic material that produced the *nephilim*; and (3) the same kind of behavior described in Genesis 6:1-4 happened after the flood, producing other *nephilim*.

The first view, a localized flood, is quite workable, but it naturally depends on the coherence of the arguments in defense of a local flood, especially those arguments dealing with the wording in the biblical text that seems to suggest the flood was worldwide.⁷³ Given the fact that the cohabitation between the human women and divine beings described in Genesis 6 began in the days of Jared/Yarad in Jewish tradition, there would have been many *nephilim* all over the known ancient world, the geographical regions noted in the Table of Nations. In any view of the great Flood, the flooded regions were repopulated. This view allows some *nephilim* descendants to have survived and resettle the regions of Canaan—and other areas where giants and individuals who claimed to be of divine ancestry are found in ancient literature. The second view seems flatly denied by Scripture. Noah and his familial generation were considered “pure” by God (Gen 6:9), a description that requires they had not engaged in any of the evil that led up to the flood, evil that included what is described in Genesis 6:1-4.

The third view is also quite possible, as it finds an explanation in the Hebrew grammar of Genesis 6:4. Without going under the hood of our English translation too much, Genesis 6:4 could easily be translated “there were *nephilim* on the earth in those days and afterward, *whenever* the sons of God went into the daughters of man.”⁷⁴ As we saw in the last chapter, Peter and Jude, like other ancient traditions about this event, have the offending sons of God of Genesis 6:1-4 imprisoned after their sin at the time of the flood. Consequently, the original sons of God could not be behind any repetition of this transgression of heaven and earth. This translation suggests that what happened in Genesis 6:1-4 happened again.

The first and third options also help answer other questions. Evangelical Christians are fond of supporting the idea of a global flood by appealing to other ancient traditions from around the world that have a cataclysmic flood story. What those apologists regularly neglect to mention is that many of those same stories *also* contain conceptual parallels to what’s described in Genesis 6:1-4, stories of gods who came from heaven and who fathered royal, kingly lines by human women.⁷⁵ What’s more, some of these tales of sexual union between the gods and human women are set *after* the time of some global

cataclysm. Genesis 6:4 suggests the same. Both a local flood or the grammatical explanation are capable to explaining the preponderance of stories in other cultures about a great flood and cohabitation between gods and human women. The local flood option would argue that these stories arise from the populations which resettled flooded areas—that some of the settlers were descended from the *nephilim* of around prior to the Genesis flood. The grammatical approach would argue that the cohabitation activity continued after the flood.

A few paragraphs ago I mentioned that “for the moment” I was arguing that the *nephilim* had something to do with the curse concerning the “seed of the *nachash*” that concerned a literal, supernatural enemy of the people of God, but that the *nachash* and the *nephilim* weren’t “physically related” in any way. That’s true, but the *nephilim* and the *nachash* share something else besides being common enemies of God’s people, something that not only demonstrates anew the supernatural nature of the *nephilim*, but also answers one of the most enduring questions in biblical theology.

⁶³ It isn’t easy to explain why this is a certain conclusion from the Hebrew text if readers haven’t had Hebrew. For those who have, Appendix ____ has the nuts and bolts details.

⁶⁴ In other words, for those more familiar with grammar, *nephilim* cannot be a *participle* from the root *naphal*. See www.themyththatistrue.com for the technical details. Since the presumed Hebrew root is a verb (“to fall”) the word in question (*nephilim*) must be a participle. Participles are how Hebrew (and many other languages) “convert” a verb to noun (person, place, or thing).

⁶⁵ “Fallen ones” is passive. That is, the term implies something happened TO these beings or persons (“some event or circumstance made them “fallen”). The form I noted in the discussion (*nephulim*) is the passive plural participle of *naphal*, and it obviously is not spelled like *nephilim*. In fact, the Hebrew root *naphal* never has a middle “y” in any of its passive verb or participle forms.

⁶⁶ “Those who fall upon” is an active idea. That is, the term implies something these beings or persons are actively doing (they are “falling upon”). The form I noted in the discussion (*nophelim*) is the active plural participle of *naphal*, and it obviously is not spelled like *nephilim*. In fact, there is no active verb or participle form in Hebrew that has a middle “y”.

⁶⁷ This is the view offered by Hamilton in his first NICOT volume on Genesis.

⁶⁸ In the next chapter we shall see that other passages beside Num 13:33 describe offspring of the *nephilim* themselves as giants.

⁶⁹ Aramaic plurals do not end in *-im*, but rather *-in*. This is not a problem for the explanation offered here since there are examples in the Hebrew Bible where Aramaic nouns are brought into the Hebrew language and subsequently pluralized with the “proper” Hebrew endings. See www.themyththatistrue.com.

⁷⁰ See Genesis 28:19 for example.

⁷¹ The Genesis 18 story is very interesting, and we have discussed it before (see Chapter 1). With respect to this chapter, one has two choices for the identity of the One called Yahweh in that chapter. Either it is Yahweh himself (the Father) in physical form, or it is the second person of the godhead. In my view the latter is preferable in view of what is likely a conceptual parallel to this chapter, Gen 32:22-31, where Jacob wrestles with a “man” but whom the text refers to as *elohim*. Later the prophet Hosea looks back at that this event and uses the term *elohim* and *mal’ak*, which suggests that it is the vice-regent of Yahweh in the form of the “Angel of Yahweh” who struggled with Jacob (see the discussion and Chapter ____). If the person in Genesis 18 is the vice-regent of the council, then Genesis 18 clearly refers to the “second God” of Israel’s religion as *Yahweh* (18:1, 10, 22, etc.)

⁷² Interestingly, one of the explanations offered by later rabbis was that Noah himself was a giant!

⁷³ My interest here is not to defend the local flood view. For arguments in defense of that view, see Carol Hill, “[The Noachian Flood: Universal or Local?](#)” *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith* 9:2 (2002); David Siemens, “[Some Relatively Non-Technical Problems With Flood Geology](#)” *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith* (1992); <http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/localflood.html>.

⁷⁴ The syntax of the verb sequence in Gen 6:4 very likely indicating what is called a “frequentative waw” (see Skinner on this verse, *International Critical Commentary, Genesis*, and Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Genesis 1-15*).

⁷⁵ List some examples. Cf. Engnell, Frankfort, Mettinger.



Chapter 9

And God Gave Them Up

As fascinating as the events precipitating the biblical flood of Noah are, it's the events that follow the flood that are most critical to understanding the way things really are—the matrix of human and divine reality in the biblical worldview. As we've seen, Genesis 6:1-4, a passage relegated to arcane status by most interpreters, proved to be the backdrop for key elements and concepts in later Israelite history and theology. We'll discover the same is true of the next passage we need to rescue from obscurity.

The Tower of Babel

Genesis 11:1-9 reads:

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." ⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." ⁸ So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

You'll notice right away that there's the same sort of "plural of exhortation" going on in verse 7 as we saw in Genesis 1:26.⁷⁶ The verse has Yahweh proclaiming "let *us* go down and confuse their language," but, as in Genesis 1:26, the plural announcement is followed by the actions of only one person, Yahweh: "So the LORD dispersed them . . ." (11:8). God declares what needs to be done to his divine council and then goes and does it. But this isn't going to be our focus in this chapter. There's something far more important going on.

Genesis 11 must be understood in conjunction with Genesis 10; the two are inseparable with respect to interpretation. Genesis 10 records what scholars have called "the Table of

Nations,” the listing of the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, Noah’s sons who survived the flood. But Genesis 10 actually gives us more than a list of physical descendants. Many of the names in this listing are not people, but geographical regions or cities. This is why scholars have opted for “Table of Nations” as opposed to “genealogies” when describing this chapter. Genesis 10 (for the most part) gives us a list of the nations whose populace can trace their ancestry to one of the three sons of Noah.

My qualification “for the most part” leads us to several important initial observations. The Table of Nations assumes that the names of Noah’s sons are behind the names of the nations. The total number of nations descended from Shem, Ham, and Japheth comes to seventy. This figure is produced by eliminating Nimrod (vv. 8-12). Nimrod doesn’t belong in the total since Genesis 10:8-12 is a biographical rabbit-trail. The text gives us no indication that “Nimrod” was to be understood as a nation, since Nimrod doesn’t “father” anyone (or a nation) in the list. The statement is merely that Nimrod came from Cush (v.8), not that he ruled over a land that would become known by his name. Rather, he ruled over Babel, Erech, Akkad, and Calneh, in “the land of Shinar.”

We learn in Genesis 11:1-9 that Yahweh dispersed the people of the earth. Prior to this dispersion the people all had one language. The story as it stands in Genesis 11:1-9 seems to end there. It appears there is little else to be learned about what went on at this division of the nations. But that’s only because we haven’t looked at what other Old Testament passages say about this event.

Dividing the Nations

Deuteronomy 32:8-9 reads as follows:⁷⁷

⁸ When the Most High apportioned the nations as an inheritance, when he divided up humankind, he established the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. ⁹ But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.

Deuteronomy 32:8-9 describes how Yahweh’s dispersal of the nations at Babel resulted in his *disinheriting* those nations. The statement in Deuteronomy 32:9 that “Yahweh’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance” tips us off that a contrast in affection and ownership is intended. Yahweh’s decision was a declaration that he was no longer going to be the god of those nations. That privilege would be granted to Israel alone. God turned away from the nations of Genesis 10-11, instead making a new nation to be the object of his affection—Israel. I like to refer to this decision of God as the “Romans 1 event of the Old Testament.” Romans 1 describes how God “gave humankind up” to their persistent rebellion.

Most English Bibles do not read “according to the number of the sons of God” in Deuteronomy 32:8. Rather, they read “according to the number of the sons of Israel.” The difference derives from disagreements between manuscripts of the Old Testament. There are many reasons why “sons of God” is the correct reading, among them being that

this reading is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁷⁸ While many modern English Bibles point this out in footnotes to Deuteronomy 32:8, several recent English translations (NRSV, ESV) have adopted the reading in recognition of its superiority.

Frankly, you don't need to know all the technical reasons for why the "sons of God" reading in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is what the verse originally said. You just need to think a bit about the *wrong* reading, the "sons of Israel." Deuteronomy 32:8-9 hearkens back to events at the Tower of Babel, an event that occurred *before* the call of Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. This means that the nations of the earth were divided at Babel *before Israel even existed as a people*. It would make no sense for God to divide up the nations of the earth "according to the number of the sons of Israel" if there was no Israel. This point is also brought home in another way, namely by the fact *Israel is not listed in the Table of Nations*.

So what happened to the other nations? What does it mean that they were "apportioned as an inheritance" and to whom were they apportioned? As odd as it sounds, the rest of the nations were summarily put under the administration—given as an inheritance—of the lesser *elohim* of the divine council. What these two verses tell us is that Yahweh decided his own people would be Israel (which did not yet exist at Babel), and the other nations drawn up as a result of the dispersal at Babylon were numbered ("counted out") according to the number of the sons of God. Interestingly, in Ugaritic literature, the number of the sons of God was 70—the same number as the nations in Deuteronomy 32:8-9.⁷⁹

That this interpretation is sound is made clear by an explicit parallel passage, Deuteronomy 4:19-20. There Moses says to the Israelites:

¹⁹ And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them whom the LORD your God has allotted to all the nations under the whole heaven.²⁰ But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.

Deuteronomy 4:19-20 is the other side of God's punitive coin. Whereas in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 God apportioned or handed out the nations to the sons of God, here we are told God "allotted" the gods to those nations. Basically, they were made for each other! God decreed, in the wake of Babel, that the other nations he had forsaken would have other gods besides Himself to worship. It is as though God was saying, "if you don't want to obey me, I'm not interested in being your god—so here are some other gods for you." Verse 20 of Deuteronomy 4 follows the "allotment" with the same idea we saw in Deuteronomy 32:9 on the heels of the division of the nations: The Lord has chosen his own people—you, O Israel, whom he took out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

But why such a severe punishment to what happened at Babel? To understand God's response, we need to back up just a bit.

After Adam and Eve sinned in Eden, they were forbidden re-entry into Eden. Recall that Eden was the mount of God, the place where the divine council had been conducting business—the place where Yahweh “resided” and where heaven and earth met. It had been Yahweh’s intention that humankind, male and female, be part of his council. After all, they were his sons and daughters; they had a divine, royal pedigree. Humanity was to have dominion over the earth as Yahweh’s imagers, his representatives—his earthly co-regents.

Part of the reason for the expulsion was to cut off Adam and Eve from the tree of life. Their sin had cost them their immortality—an attribute of divine beings that was naturally part of “council turf.” But expulsion also meant they were cut off from the council proceedings. This doesn’t mean Adam and Eve (and so humanity) were disenfranchised from being God’s imagers. That status was and is inseparable from being human. Rather, they were expelled from the council. But they were also forgiven. They were still God’s children and his imagers, but they there would be no living humans in the divine council. Only upon death would Adam and Eve be reunited with Yahweh in a personal, eternal relationship. Life on earth was like an indefinite, unpaid suspension or an involuntary leave of absence from a company you love and long for. Humanity has an unending desire for utopia because we’re wired that way.

We can see a foreshadowing of the prospect of the new heaven and new earth here. There’s a reason why the book of Revelation ends with “another Eden.” I can’t go into the details of how the new heaven and earth in Revelation utilize divine council imagery, but for now let it be noted that God will bring all things full circle—human beings will indeed rule and reign with him and his heavenly host on earth.

The point of this remembrance for our current purposes is that, once expelled from the place of the divine council, it was a sacrilege to try and reverse that decision by one’s own human efforts. The *nachash* had succeeded in seducing Eve in Eden with the promise that she could be like one of the *elohim* of the council—to have their knowledge—before that knowledge had been granted by her Father, Yahweh (Gen. 3:22). Genesis 1:26 informs us that it had been Yahweh’s intention all along to make humankind like the cosmic members of the council, to make them part of the council. But what God planned it is God’s right to bring to pass in his own time. Ironically, Eve had been seduced into wanting what was to be hers but not on her timetable.

The same is true of the Babel incident. It was a sacrilege to build a tower that would “reach to the heavens.” Why? The reason isn’t because God hates architecture or construction work. The reason is that the heavens were perceived as the place where God lived—and where the council held session. This is demonstrable in several ways.

It is important to notice that the building of the tower attracts the attention of Yahweh and, ultimately, the divine council:

⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.”

Were this just a mundane building project, one would think God would have better things to do. Yahweh is not a glorified building inspector. The building of the tower of Babel represents an attempt by humanity to enter the divine domain. It is a rebellion against God’s imposed limitations. After the debacle of Eden, Yahweh instituted an orderly relationship between the world of humankind and the world of the divine. Heaven and earth will only meet in a broad, inclusive way, at the new heaven and the new earth—when we go back to Eden. The current boundaries are to be kept. As Genesis 6:1-4 was a transgression of the boundary or “proper domain,” so was the building of the tower of Babel. The problem is that human beings, created *like elohim* (Gen 1:26) perpetually seek to *be elohim*. God has a schedule and plan for humanity’s glorification, and it is not for humanity to make substitutions or alter the timetable.

Yahweh’s response to this rebellion was decisive. Prior to Genesis 11, the Bible gives us the impression that God was still interacting with humanity in a personal way. It was in the time of Cain and Abel that people “began to call on the name of the Lord,” at least implying anyone could have a personal relationship with Yahweh if they wanted. God has to clean the slate in Genesis 6-8, but then restores a relationship with humanity in Genesis 9. The tower of Babel marks a dramatic change in this circumstance, though. According to Deuteronomy 32:8-9, at Babel God disinherits the nations of the world. No longer will he relate to them directly. It is as if to say God is giving them a bit of what they seem want—to be out from under his thumb so they can make their own decisions.

While the decision was harsh, the other nations are not completely forsaken. As we read the Old Testament, we discover that it was God’s intention that the Israelites serve as a conduit for all the other nations to come back to the true God. This is one of the reasons why Israel is later called “a kingdom of priests” (Exo. 19:6) and why the Law of Moses contained instructions for Gentiles being brought into Israel, thereby gaining re-entrance into the community of the people of God. Israel would be tended to by the “God of gods” and the “Lord of lords” (Deut. 10:17), and those disinherited would be in spiritual bondage to the corrupt sons of God. And yet Yahweh would offer a path of escape—but that path wound through Israel (and eventually Israel’s messiah).

The Gods Can’t Be Trusted

One of the more interesting questions with all this concerns whether the sons of God set over the nations in the wake of the Babel debacle were servants of Yahweh in the council who eventually became corrupt, or were already rebels. Either is workable in Old Testament theology, but we really are not told in Scripture. One thing we that is made clear, however, is that the gods of the nations did not direct the people under their

dominion to the true God, and abused their subjects. In fact, the gods of the nations—the sons of God of Deuteronomy 32—are the gods being judged in the now familiar text of Psalm 82:

- ¹ God (*elohim*) stands in the divine council;
among the gods (*elohim*) He pronounces judgment.
- ² How long will you (plural) judge unjustly,
showing favor to the wicked? *Selah*.
- ³ Judge the wretched and the orphan,
vindicate the lowly and the poor,
- ⁴ rescue the wretched and the needy;
save them from the hand of the wicked.
- ⁵ They neither know nor understand,
they go about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth totter.
- ⁶ I said, “you (plural) gods (*elohim*),
sons of the Most High (*beney Elyon*), all of you (plural);
- ⁷ but you (plural) shall die as men do,
fall like any prince.
- ⁸ Arise, O God (*elohim*),
judge (the command is singular) the earth,
for you (singular) shall inherit all the nations.

In Psalm 82:2 Yahweh charges the *elohim* with being corrupt judges who favor the wicked. The wording of 82:3-4 suggests that God is asking rhetorical questions in that verse—spelling out the kind of judgment the *elohim* should be conducting, as opposed to what they’re doing (82:2). We know that it is God speaking (and not the psalmist) by virtue of the first person in 82:6. It is most natural to assume that the speaker of verse 6 (“I said”) is the same as the speaker in the preceding verses. After all, in 82:6-7 who else would be decreeing punishment against other *elohim*? And the basis for such a punishment is decreed would be the charges leveled in 82:2-4. Psalm 82:8 provides us with the evidence we need for connecting this psalm to Deuteronomy 32, and hence to Genesis 11. The psalmist here calls for God himself—the true God who forsook the nations long ago—to rise up and take the nations back as his inheritance. The point in the verse is not that Yahweh wasn’t the king over all the earth at the time the psalmist wrote. Rather, it is that the only real solution for ending the enslavement of the nations is for the sovereign God to be their God—to enter a relationship with them as he has with Israel.

The situation created by yet another instance of the lack of trustworthiness of divine beings (cf. Job 4:18; 15:15) was serious. Psalm 82:5 basically tells us that the corruption of the sons of God over the nations threw affairs on earth into chaos. And while Yahweh did pronounce judgment against the corrupt *elohim* (“you will die like men do”), the chaos was controlled—and even part of an intentional judgment on the nations who had been disinherited. As we know from our own experience, when God gives people up to their own sin and rebellion, the result is chaos. And yet God can use such misery as part of a later appeal to repent. What I’m talking about here takes us back to Deuteronomy.

The “Deuteronomy 32 Worldview”

Yahweh’s fateful decision at the tower of Babel to abandon his relationship with the nations of the earth and their people to lesser *elohim* is of fundamental importance for understanding the Old Testament. These two passages are at the core of the Old Testament’s own explanation as to where the pagan pantheons of the nations come from. From Babel onward, the rest of the story of the Old Testament is about Israel versus the disinherited nations, and Yahweh versus the corrupt, rebel *elohim* of those nations. This geographical and spiritual conflict is at the heart of what I have referred to previously as the “Deuteronomy 32 worldview.” This is the worldview of the ancient Israelite, and the Christians of the early Church who inherited the Old Testament as their Bible. I’ll have a lot to say about how this worldview plays out in the Old Testament, but we have already ventured down some of those roads far enough that you can get a glimpse of what we’ll encounter.

The Bible describes a world where cosmic-geographical lines have been drawn. Israel was holy ground because it was Yahweh’s inheritance. The territory of other nations belonged to other *elohim* because Yahweh had decreed it as such. The lands of the other nations were populated by those who worshipped the corrupt *elohim*, and by the remnant of those who had been fathered by other *elohim*. The nations sought to consume Israel—the fallen *elohim* wanted Yahweh’s portion as their own. Yahweh’s people would either worship them or be eliminated. Israel would only gain their landed inheritance by holy war. Circumcision was given as a reminder to Israelites that they were Yahweh’s portion. The symbol was sexual and procreative in nature to serve as a reminder of how the nation was birthed—by the miraculous intervention of Yahweh with Abraham and Sarah. The contrast with the procreation of Genesis 6:1-4 and its results could not be more stark.

As we’ll see in subsequent chapters, this worldview helps make sense of both “odd” passages and some sweeping theological concepts in the Bible. For example, note the unusual concern of David when he is being pursued by Saul and driven out of Israel:

I Samuel 26

¹⁷ Saul recognized David’s voice and said, “Is this your voice, my son David?” And David said, “It is my voice, my lord, O king.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? ¹⁹ Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the LORD who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering, but if it is men, may they be cursed before the LORD, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of the LORD, saying, ‘Go, serve other gods.’”

David links being in Israel with being able to worship Yahweh. Why? Is David ignorant of the fact that the God who made heaven and earth can be anywhere? No—David

knows that Israel is Yahweh's portion, and all other territory has been disinherited by Yahweh and handed over to the other gods. He can't worship as he should if he is not on holy ground. The ground outside Israel belongs to other gods.

Another curious incident points to the same worldview. Upon being healed by Elisha the prophet, Naaman, commander of the army of Syria, a domain outside Israel, asks a strange request of the prophet:

2 Kings 5

¹⁷ Then Naaman said, "If not, please let there be given to your servant two mules' load of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD." ¹⁸ In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter." ¹⁹ He said to him, "Go in peace."

Why would Naaman would ask Elisha for *dirt*? In the Deuteronomy 32 worldview, this is easily explicable. Naaman wants to make sure he is worshipping the God of Israel from now on. The only way he can be sure he is worshipping the true God on holy ground is to take the holy ground with him.

In the Deuteronomy 32 worldview, Israel was Yahweh's chosen people, a people destined for blessing. Israel was also a hunted people, targeted for destruction, by both spiritual and physical forces. And when the Church inherited Israel's status as "Abraham's seed" (Gal. 3), Christians were placed in the crosshairs as well.

The idea that the world was populated and controlled by fallen *elohim*, bent on retaining their certain geographical regions and the people in them is therefore a New Testament idea as well. Why else would Paul used geographical terminology to describe the heavenly host: principalities, rulers, thrones, authorities, powers, dominions? Other snippets from the New Testament come to mind. Against the backdrop that the seventy nations surrounding the holy land of Israel were under evil dominion, is it a coincidence that Jesus first sends out seventy disciples when the kingdom of God is inaugurated?⁸⁰ Hardly. It was the inauguration of the reinstatement of the kingdom of God over *all* nations, as intended from the beginning.

But The Gods are Just Idols . . . Right?

The Deuteronomy 32 worldview is not something that would be welcomed by those who are more comfortable with a demythologized Bible. As with Psalm 82, where the plain meaning of the text is that Israelite religion acknowledges the existence of other *elohim*, the divine plurality underlying the Deuteronomy 32 worldview is resisted, usually in two ways: (1) by asserting that the sons of God / corrupt *elohim* in these passages are only idols, not real entities; and (2) by appealing to "denial statements" in Deuteronomy and

Isaiah that have Yahweh saying there are “no gods besides him.” As we saw in Chapter Three when dealing with the reality of other gods in Psalm 82 and 89, these objections create theological problems and are not internally coherent. Let’s take the them in order.

The first objection argues that the sun, moon, stars, and heavenly host of Deuteronomy 4:19-20 are idols because in the verses immediately preceding have Moses warning Israel to not make idols. The passage reads:

15"Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, 16beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, 17the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, 18the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. 19 And beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them. And the LORD your God has allotted them, to all the peoples under the whole heaven. 20 But the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.

At first glance the arguments seems coherent. It fails, however, on two counts. First, a careful reading of the passage tells us that what kind of idols Moses was talking about. Nowhere in verses 15-18 does Moses warn against making an image of the sun, the moon, the stars, or anything else in the host of heaven. Rather, the images he forbids are of animals, birds, fish, and (possibly) beings in the waters of Sheol under the earth. Moses transitions in verse 19 to the heavenly host. In effect, Deuteronomy 4:15-18 shows us there was a single concern—worship of any other entity or thing besides Yahweh—articulated in two ways: don’t make images of anything in the animal kingdom, and don’t worship any member of the heavenly host.

The second problem with this objection is external to the passage. In any interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:15-20 we ought to ask some questions: In what way does the entire book of Deuteronomy understand the heavenly host? Is there any clear argument in Deuteronomy that the heavenly host are idols? Is that the *only* way they are understood in Deuteronomy? Since Deuteronomy 4:19-20 is clearly a parallel to Deuteronomy 32:8-9, how are the sons of God / *elohim* understood in Deuteronomy? Are they ever or only idols? These questions are not only important for answering the question at hand. They are vital for getting a clear picture of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview.

Answers to these questions are obtainable by “triangulating” several passages in Deuteronomy. These passages each contain elements of the answer and must be put together and interpreted with respect to one another. To telegraph the conclusion a bit, the parallel between Deuteronomy 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 informs us that the host of heaven, at least in those passages, are real *elohim*, not inanimate idols of wood or stone. This

would be akin to the heavenly host as divine beings in I Kings 22. That this is what Moses had in mind is apparent from Deuteronomy 17:3, 29:25, and (especially) Deuteronomy 32:17, 43. That said, it is very natural that the ancient disinherited pagan make idols to worship his gods. For this reason, while the conclusion is inescapable that the host of heaven / sons of God are real *elohim*, those *elohim* are associated with the idols erected and worshipped by pagans in their honor.

As with the parallel relationship between Deuteronomy 4:19-20 and 32:8-9, Deuteronomy 17:2-3 identifies the host of heaven as *elohim*:

2"If there is found among you, within any of your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, a man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing his covenant, 3and has gone and served other gods (*elohim*) and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden . . .

Deuteronomy 29:25 does the same, though a bit more indirectly. Speaking of the Israelites, Moses says:

25 They turned to the service of other gods (*elohim*) and worshiped them, gods whom they had not experienced and whom He [God] had not allotted to them.

The key here is the word “allotted.” This is the same Hebrew word as used in Deuteronomy 4:19 for the host of heaven “allotted” to the other nations, and in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 for the “allotted inheritance” idea. The point in Deuteronomy 29:25 is that Israel had committed the sacrilege of worshipping the other gods allotted to the disinherited nations.

The connections are clear, but someone could still ask whether the word “gods” in these passages still just refers to idols. After all, there are a variety of verses in the Bible where what the context clearly says are pieces of wood and stone are called “gods.” Deuteronomy 32:17 clears up the question. Read the verse carefully, with attention to the Hebrew terms that are in the parentheses as well as the parallel structuring:

They sacrificed to demons (*shedim*), not God (*eloah*),
to gods (*elohim*) they had never known,
to new gods (lit., “new ones”) that had come recently,
whom your fathers had never dreaded.

The meaning of the verse is unambiguous. Israel had committed the blasphemy of sacrificing to demons. These demons were not God; they were not the one to whom sacrifice was owed. Israel was Yahweh’s inheritance and possession. Notice that the ensuing phrase creates a parallel structure that repeats the thought, but when the thought is echoed, the word describing the beings to whom the sacrifices were made is not

“demons”—it is “gods” (*elohim*). The demons that had been sacrificed to are called *elohim*.

Anyone who takes the Bible and theology seriously would not deny that demons exist. Since this verse tells us the demons are *elohim*, it cannot be denied that the *elohim* are real entities. Any such denial would mean denying that demons are real. If the *elohim* are just blocks of stone or wood, then so are the demons. And if the *elohim* in this part of Deuteronomy 32 are real and not just blocks of stone, then the *bene elohim* (sons of God) of Deuteronomy 32:8-9 cannot be dismissed as only lifeless idols. The same must be said of the host of heaven in Deuteronomy 4:19-20, the parallel to Deuteronomy 32:8-9. The host of heaven allotted to the disinherited nations are real—they are demonic *elohim*—not just statues.

This verse is frequently obscured in English translations, though the Hebrew underlying the English is quite clear. For example, the ESV reads, “They sacrificed to demons that were no gods (*eloah*) . . .” That translation makes it sound as though the very opposite of what I’ve sketched out here is the case. The ESV translation takes the word *eloah* as plural, and that is its downfall. This noun is not plural, but singular. The translation of *eloah* should be “God” as I have translated above. The NRSV agrees: “They sacrificed to demons, not God . . .”⁸¹

No Gods Besides Me...?

By this point in our journey it should be beyond question that there are passages in the Old Testament that affirm the existence of other gods. Chapter Two alone—our introduction to the divine council—made that quite clear. Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and the passages related to it also testify to this biblical teaching. But the second objection must still be addressed. What about statements in the Bible where the Yahweh or someone else says “there is no god besides me” or some similar statement?

It may surprise you that several of these statements occur in the two chapters we just devoted so much space to—Deuteronomy 4 and 32:

Deuteronomy 4:35 - “You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD, he is *the* God (*ha-elohim*), besides him there is no other.”

Deuteronomy 4:39 – “Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that Yahweh, he is *the* God (*ha-elohim*) in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.”

Deuteronomy 32:39 – “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.”

Liberal scholars tend to see the juxtaposition of these statements with other parts of Deuteronomy 4 and 32 that affirm the existence of other *elohim* as either a hapless

merging of polytheistic and monotheistic traditions or just plain old blunders by the scribes who allegedly put the Bible together. We've already seen that evangelicals try to get over this hurdle by denying the *elohim* are real. Neither explanation is coherent. There is a much simpler solution: statements that declare there is "none besides" Yahweh are declarations of Yahweh's *incomparability*. This is completely consistent with what I noted in Chapter Three: Yahweh is an *elohim*, but no other *elohim* is Yahweh. He is unique and incomparable.

I've written a lot on this subject, but most of it is very technical.⁸² I can spare you most of the verbiage about Hebrew sentence structure and linguistics, but I think one more thought is appropriate. I argue that such "denial statements" commenting on other gods and Yahweh are not denials at all—they are statements of incomparability. Two passages in the prophets make my point clear. Isaiah uses one of the familiar "denial phrases" *to denote comparison*, not non-existence. Consider the following, noting the underlining:

Isaiah 47:1-8

1 Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans! For you shall no more be called tender and delicate. 2 Take the millstones and grind flour, put off your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs, pass through the rivers. 3 Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen. I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one. 4 Our Redeemer--the LORD of hosts is his name--is the Holy One of Israel. 5 Sit in silence, and go into darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans; for you shall no more be called the mistress of kingdoms. 6 I was angry with my people; I profaned my heritage; I gave them into your hand; you showed them no mercy; on the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy. 7 You said, "I shall be mistress forever," so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end. 8 Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me"; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children."

Zephaniah 2:13-15

13 And he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert. 14 Herds shall lie down in her midst, all kinds of beasts; even the owl and the hedgehog shall lodge in her capitals; a voice shall hoot in the window; devastation will be on the threshold; for her cedar work will be laid bare. 15 This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, "I am, and there is no one else." What a desolation she has become, a lair for wild beasts! Everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes his fist.

Respectively, these passages have Babylon and Nineveh saying "there is none besides me." Are we to believe that the point of the phrase is to declare that no other cities *exist* except Babylon or Nineveh? Hardly. This is patently absurd. The point of the statement

is that Babylon and Nineveh had considered themselves incomparable, as though no other city could measure up to them. This is precisely the point when these same phrases are used of other gods—they cannot measure up to Yahweh. There is no contradiction in Deuteronomy 4 and 32.

The stage is now set for understanding history and theology of Israel on its own terms. The story of God’s people is not a mere mundane tale of judges and kings and scribes and soldiers going about their business. It’s the story of cosmic conflict, of a winner-take-all spiritual war. It’s time to read your Bible again for the first time.

⁷⁶ See Chapter Four.

⁷⁷ For a technical discussion of the translation of Deut. 32:8-9 see <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/DT32BibSac.pdf>.

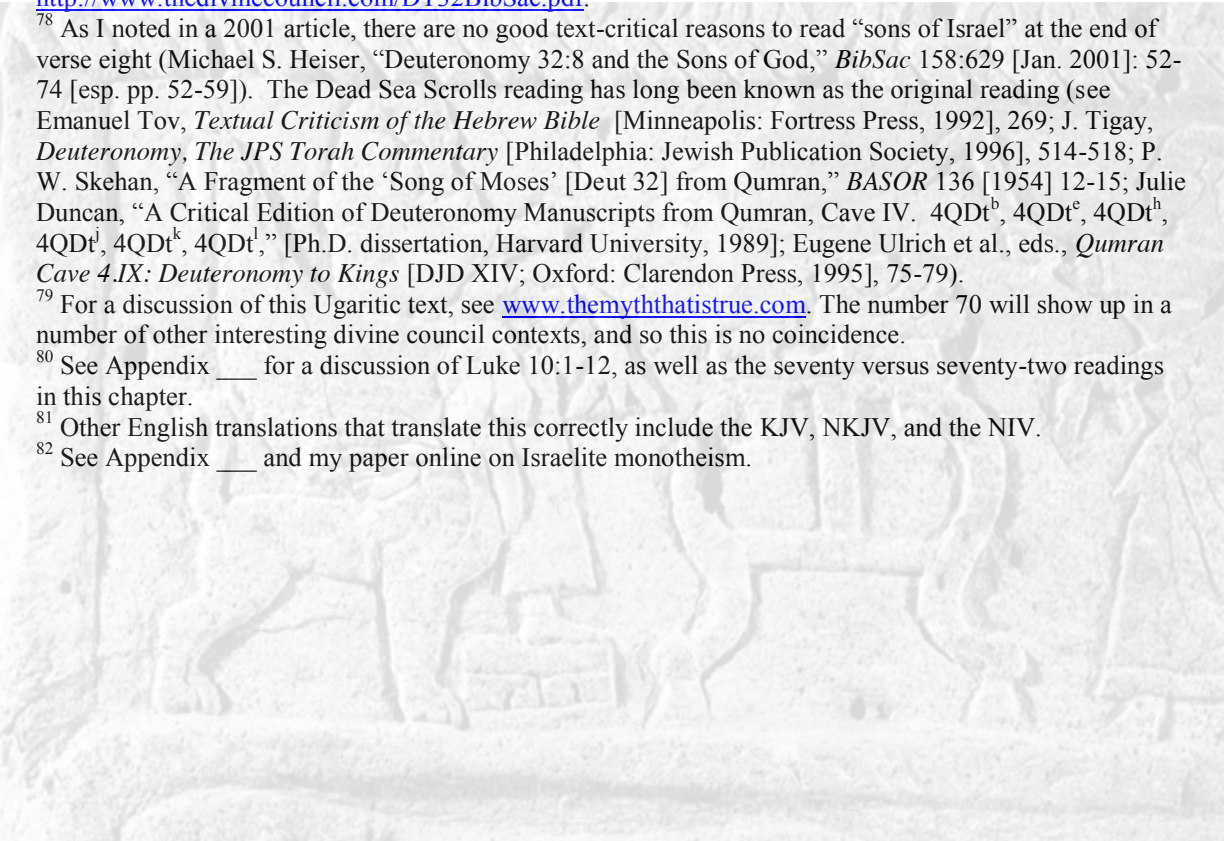
⁷⁸ As I noted in a 2001 article, there are no good text-critical reasons to read “sons of Israel” at the end of verse eight (Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *BibSac* 158:629 [Jan. 2001]: 52-74 [esp. pp. 52-59]). The Dead Sea Scrolls reading has long been known as the original reading (see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 269; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy, The JPS Torah Commentary* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996], 514-518; P. W. Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘Song of Moses’ [Deut 32] from Qumran,” *BASOR* 136 [1954] 12-15; Julie Duncan, “A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV. 4QDt^b, 4QDt^c, 4QDt^h, 4QDtⁱ, 4QDt^k, 4QDt^l,” [Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1989]; Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.IX: Deuteronomy to Kings* [DJD XIV; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995], 75-79).

⁷⁹ For a discussion of this Ugaritic text, see www.themyththatistrue.com. The number 70 will show up in a number of other interesting divine council contexts, and so this is no coincidence.

⁸⁰ See Appendix ____ for a discussion of Luke 10:1-12, as well as the seventy versus seventy-two readings in this chapter.

⁸¹ Other English translations that translate this correctly include the KJV, NKJV, and the NIV.

⁸² See Appendix ____ and my paper online on Israelite monotheism.



Chapter 10

An Unexpected Word

We learned from Deuteronomy 32:8-9 that Yahweh placed the nations under the governance of junior *elohim*—the sons of God of his divine council. The stated intention on God’s part was that, having finished with his efforts to be the God of an unwilling humanity, it was time to start over as it were. This is why the author of Genesis moved immediately from the Babel incident to Genesis 12, where God chose Abraham to make for himself a new nation. The nations are history—now let’s get started.

If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time, or attended Sunday School as a child, you know the Abraham story. God calls Abraham out of Mesopotamia, completely out of the blue, Abraham leaves, then God makes a covenant with him to have a child in his old age. Simple, right? As with so many other Bible stories we’ve already touched on in this book, there is much more than meets the eye. Unwrapping this one will involve a bit of a rabbit trail, but it’s pretty important. Believe it or not, the call of Abraham turns out to be one of the most important clues to understanding some things the apostle John wrote in the New Testament about the deity of Jesus. Say what? Keep reading.

The Joy of Abraham

In Genesis 11:10-32 we are given Abram’s (Abraham’s) lineage. It’s tempting to just skip those genealogies and go right to Genesis 12, where we think we’ll read about Abram’s first encounter with Yahweh. But it’s important to notice a small detail at the tail end of the family history. If you compare the last two verses of the genealogical backdrop, Genesis 11:31-32, with Acts 7:2-4, you’ll discover that Genesis 12 was *not* the first time that God had appeared to Abram. Genesis 11:31-32 tells us that before the Genesis 12 encounter, Abram and his family, led by Abram’s father Terah, had already left Mesopotamia and settled in a place called Haran. We subsequently read in Acts 7:2-4:

² And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,³ and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.

Since there is no specific account of a divine appearance to Abram in Mesopotamia in the Old Testament, we pretty much have to presume that Stephen was thinking of Genesis 11:31-32 when he said this. This is important in that it established an important fact: that Abram’s first encounter in Mesopotamia involved *a visible appearance* of Yahweh.

Abram and Yahweh had talked before—and when that first conversation had occurred, we read in Acts 7:2, Yahweh had *appeared* to Abram.

A close reading of the Old Testament tells us that a visible manifestation is actually a normal *modus operandi* for Yahweh with respect to Abram and the patriarchs. On many occasions where the biblical text has Yahweh⁸³ speaking with Abram, the language of an *appearance* is used to describe the event:

Gen 12:1-3 – ¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Gen 12:6-7 - ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

This brings us to Genesis 15, where the covenant of Genesis 12:1-3 is repeated and ratified by a covenantal ceremony. The description of the person speaking to Yahweh here is even more startling:

¹ After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” ² But Abram said, “O Lord God [Hebrew, *adonai-Yahweh*] what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” ⁴ And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” ⁵ And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ⁶ And he believed the Lord [Hebrew, *Yahweh*] and he counted it to him as righteousness.

This is a fascinating text. Notice right from the start that it is the *Word* of the Lord who comes to Abram *in a vision*. For sure we might be tempted to say that the phrase “the word of the Lord came to him” merely denotes a sound in Abram’s ear and no other person is visibly there. I would suggest, though, that this is no mere voice or auditory sensation. The Word here is something that can be *seen*—why else call it a *vision*? Abraham has previously had such a vision (Gen 12: 6-7), and in verse four we read that the Word *brought him [Abram] outside*” to continue the conversation. This isn’t the kind of description one would expect if Abram was hearing only a sound. One would expect something like “And Abram followed the sound outside.”

The best evidence that Genesis 15 is describing a visible person referred to as the “Word” comes from the New Testament—and from Jesus, the Word, himself. In John 8:56, the Incarnate Word tells his Jewish antagonists *that he appeared to Abraham prior to his incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth*: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” The Jews object to this claim, whereupon Jesus utters his famous statement, “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).⁸⁴ My point here is that only one passage in the Old Testament makes sense of this claim by Jesus, the Word—Genesis 15:1, where “the Word of the Lord appeared to Abraham in a vision” as the visible, personal manifestation of Yahweh.

I hope you grasp the significance of this interchange. Since the Word is clearly *equated* and *identified* as Yahweh in Genesis 15, when the New Testament has Jesus saying “that was me,” he is claiming *to be* Yahweh in visible form. He is the Word of the Old Testament, who was the visible Yahweh.⁸⁵ And even more ironic, the Word is speaking to Abraham about his promised miraculous offspring, through whom all nations of the earth will be blessed. And we learn from Paul in Galatians 3:16 that the ultimate son of Abraham was Christ himself (“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ”). The deity who would one day become a human being and whose body would be from the line of Abraham, was speaking to Abraham in physical form before even the first of Abraham’s children had been conceived! And since this seed of Abraham (Christ) is also of the lineage of Adam and Eve (Luke 3:38), he is the seed of the woman who would undo the effects of the Fall, and who was the object of hatred by the seed of the *nachash*.

Yahweh and His Assistant—Yahweh

My goal here is not to bend your mind (too much, anyway). All of the items above will be more fully developed as we continue. Rather, my goal is to establish something that we will see again and again in this book as we journey through the Old Testament. Yahweh, who is spirit (John 4:24), regularly appeared to people in physical form. More accurately, the Old Testament actually witnesses to *two* Yahwehs. There is the “unembodied” Yahweh, who is spirit, and who cannot be detected with the normal human senses, and whom it would be fatal for humans to see. Then there is the second Yahweh, who comes to humans by visual means: a cloud, flashing light, a burning bush, and as a physical being. I say “two Yahwehs” because, at times, both the unembodied and the “sensory Yahweh” are described as being *together at the same time*.

If you’re tracking, you realize that this is the early conception of a godhead in the Old Testament. That doctrine or idea was not invented in the New Testament—it is drawn from the Old Testament. What makes the New Testament conception climactic is that the second Yahweh of the Old Testament is finally born of a human woman, thereby becoming a vulnerable human being, sent on that path by God his Father, to undo the effects of the Fall.

Sometimes the second Yahweh, when he comes to people in a way they can process, comes in the corporeal form of a man. I would argue that this is the case in Genesis 15. There are several strands of evidence for that conclusion.

First, consider Genesis 18, perhaps the most famous biblical passage for a physical appearance of Yahweh:

¹ And the LORD [Yahweh] appeared to him [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth.

That one of these three men is Yahweh is evident from the divine name used in Hebrew text (Yahweh is translated “LORD” in all capital letters). But, you might object, that word is just part of the narrative as written by someone who wasn’t there. While it is true that at the beginning of the chapter we are not clearly told that Abraham recognized Yahweh, this isn’t significant in light of what follows. We are told that Yahweh in Genesis 18 and his two associates shared a meal with Abraham (18:3-8). They could not eat the meal unless they were embodied.

The narrator subsequently makes it clear that Abraham *did* know he was in the presence of Yahweh by means of the narrator’s description of his conversation with Yahweh after the other two “men” leave to go to Sodom. Once Abraham discerns that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is imminent, he objects out of concern for his nephew Lot, a resident of Sodom. Addressing the Yahweh figure he says, “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” It is clear that Abraham knows the person before him is the “Judge of all the earth” who has the power of life and death over Sodom and Gomorrah.

The “two Yahwehs” idea is also evidenced in the text when Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. In one of the easiest-to-overlook verses in the Bible we read (note underlining carefully): “Then (Yahweh) the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from (Yahweh) the LORD out of heaven.” Hope you caught it: Yahweh rained down sulfur and fire from Yahweh. There are two Yahwehs in the verse!

You may not have ever seen two Yahwehs in that verse before, but the rabbis before, during, and after Jesus’ day did. This verse eventually became a focal point of discussion for something accepted in Judaism for centuries—the idea of there being *two powers in heaven*.⁸⁶ This notion of two Yahwehs—a “greater” Yahweh and a “lesser” Yahweh—was accepted in Judaism until after the rise of Christianity. At that time, Christians (who were, in the beginning of the Church, mostly Jewish) found it useful for articulating the deity of Jesus and a godhead, and for legitimizing the worship of Jesus alongside the God of Israel. We don’t need to get into the history of all this, though. For our purposes, note that what I’ve introduced you to is very ancient and quite understandably creates a link between the Old Testament and Judaism and the godhead of Christianity and the New

Testament. Jesus “was and wasn’t God” at the same time, in that, while he was God—the same essence as the Father—he wasn’t the Father. They were two separate persons but were the same being or essence. So it was with the second Yahweh. He was Yahweh—since he is identified as such—but he wasn’t the “Father” or “unembodied Yahweh.” He was Yahweh in physical form.

The Physical Word of the LORD

It is evident in Genesis 18 that Abraham did indeed recognize to whom he was talking. But how? How would Abraham have recognized this man as Yahweh? I would suggest that he’d seen him before, namely in Genesis 15, but likely even earlier.⁸⁷

The second indication that Yahweh at times appeared as a man is drawn from the life of Samuel when he was a boy. I Samuel 3 is another familiar Bible story that we often read through too quickly. Little Samuel keeps hearing *a voice* calling for him while he’s trying to sleep, but there’s more to it than that. The voice is the Word of God:

1 Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. 2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. 3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the Lord called Samuel, and he said, “Here I am!” 5 and ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. 6 And the Lord called again, “Samuel!” and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8 And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the young man. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.’ ” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 And the Lord came and stood, calling as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant hears.” . . . 19 And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. 21 And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

I hope you’re as amazed as I was the first time I saw this passage in this light. As with Genesis 15, the first verse of this passage makes a clear association between the *Word* of the Lord and a *visionary* experience—not a mere auditory event. The Word was rare because visions were rare. Notice at the end of the chapter the fact that we are talking about the Word as a being who was seen is absolutely nailed down. The Lord (Yahweh)

“appeared *again*” at Shiloh, the place where the tabernacle (“temple”) was located before Solomon’s temple was built. And Yahweh “revealed himself”—again the language of sight—*by the Word* of the Lord. Notice as well that once Eli figures out what’s going on and instructs Samuel on how to respond, the Word came *again* and “stood” before Samuel. Voices do not stand! Persons do. God appears once again in physical form and is referred to as the Word.

Our last example from the Hebrew Bible concerning Yahweh as a man is Jeremiah 1, where Yahweh calls the prophet to service:

1 The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, 2 to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. 3 It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. 4 Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” 6 Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! [Hebrew, *adonai-Yahweh*] Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” 7 But the Lord [Yahweh] said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.” 9 Then the Lord [Yahweh] put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord [Yahweh] said to me, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

It is quite clear from the first eight verses in this chapter that the prophet is conversing with Yahweh, who in verse 4 is referred to as “the Word.” We could easily take this as Jeremiah speaking to the air or responding to something only in his ear. But then comes verse nine, where the Word *reaches out* and *touches* Jeremiah. Sounds don’t “reach out and touch” people. This is what a physical person does.

If you are familiar with your Bible, by now you can see the connection between all of this and John 1:1-3, where John identifies the “Word” (the “Logos” in Greek) as the one who became flesh (1:14) and lived with them—Jesus. That kind of talk can be confusing. How does a person become known as the “Word”? Most scholars think that John got this idea from the influence of Greek thought on the Jews, specifically from a Jewish writer named Philo, who wrote a lot about the Logos. Although I wouldn’t say John was totally uninfluenced by Greek culture (it was a Greek world, and the New Testament was written in Greek), I would suggest that John got the idea from his Old Testament, not the Greeks.

The Word of the LORD, the Messenger of the LORD

Genesis 15 wasn’t the last meeting Abraham had with the “second Yahweh.” Contact continued with him and his sons, the rest of the biblical patriarchs. In order to process the

episodes that follow, you need to internalize the concept that the Word of Yahweh as a person was, in effect, the special messenger of Yahweh. This might seem obvious at first. Yahweh in physical form appears to Abraham with a message—in fact he is called the “Word.” Bearing a message makes him a messenger. This messenger “was and wasn’t” Yahweh. He was identified with Yahweh, but also distinguished from Yahweh.

Let’s take a look at what else happens to Abraham and the other patriarchs in regard to the second Yahweh figure. Recall that the second Yahweh often (but not exclusively) was made manifest in the form of a man.

Gen 22:1-2 – ¹ After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” ² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

Gen 22:10-12 - ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” ¹² He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide [Lit., “Yahweh will see/Yahweh sees”]; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided [Lit., “it was seen”].” ¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

The first thing to notice is that God speaks to Abraham. Second, Abraham recognized the voice. After Abraham obeys God’s command and prepares Isaac for sacrifice, Abraham is commanded to cease the sacrifice by a voice—which he again recognizes. But this time we are told that the voice is that of the “Angel of the LORD” (“Angel of Yahweh”). The word “angel” here is the Hebrew word *mal’ak*, which simply means “messenger.” The title “Angel of the LORD” simply means “Messenger of the LORD.”

The next items for observation are very important. The Angel speaks to Abraham in verse 11, and then distinguishes himself from God (the speaker of 22:1-2). But immediately after doing so, he commends Abraham for not withholding Isaac “from me”—there us a switch to the first person. After the ram is provided, the Angel speaks again and mouths

the covenant Yahweh made with Abraham—again in the first person. This is very typical of ancient messenger protocol—the messenger assumes the identity of the one who has given the message:

“By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD (Yahweh), because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

As the Word / Messenger / Angel interacts with Abraham’s chosen sons, the sons of the covenant, it becomes even clearer that the Messenger / message-Giver are tightly identified. The Messenger is Yahweh in physical form, but yet isn’t.

The Gods of Isaac and Jacob

The pattern holds with Isaac and Jacob. In Genesis 26:1-5, the Yahweh figure appears to Isaac and reiterates the terms of the covenant made with his father Abraham:

¹ Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. ² And the LORD (Yahweh) appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. ³ Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. ⁴ I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”

According to Genesis 26:23-24, a short time later in Isaac’s life, there is another appearance. In this instance, the visible Yahweh is explicitly identified as the God of Abraham:

²³ From there he [Isaac] went up to Beersheba. ²⁴ And the LORD (Yahweh) appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham’s sake.” ²⁵ So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac’s servants dug a well.

After these two occasions, we next see the Yahweh figure encounter Isaac’s son, Jacob. The episode, known as the story of “Jacob’s Ladder,” though quite familiar, deserves some close attention. Noting the underline portions, in Genesis 28:10-22 we read:

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! ¹³ And behold, the LORD (Yahweh) stood above it and said, “I am the LORD (Yahweh), the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” ¹⁸ So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”

Several items are noteworthy for our discussion. First, Jacob sees (plural) “angels of God” (in Hebrew, *mal’akey-elohim*) going up and down the structure. In this encounter, other divine council members are present. Second, the Yahweh figure is also visibly present along with these other divine beings. Third, the Yahweh figure promises to protect Jacob throughout his life. This will be an important point to retain once we get to Genesis 48 below. Fourth, Jacob names the place Bethel (“house of God”). We know from the Abraham stories that there already was a place that was so-named because it was associated with divine appearances. Note Jacob’s comment in verse 22: “and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house.” Obviously, a stone pillar is neither a house nor a temple. The point was that the stone pillar marked the spot as a place where the divine and human worlds met.

As Jacob’s life proceeds, he is in and out of trouble, and yet Yahweh is with him. After he succeeds in fleeing from his uncle Laban, Jacob learns that he will soon be coming face-to-face with Esau, the brother from whom he had stolen his father’s blessing year ago. At the time of Jacob’s trickery, Esau had sought to kill him, and so now Jacob is wondering whether his brother is still holding a grudge. In fact, Jacob takes steps to escape from a direct meeting. We pick up the narrative in Genesis 32:

¹ Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ² And when Jacob saw them he said, “This is God’s camp!” So he called the name of that place Mahanaim. ³ And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land

of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴ instructing them, “Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, ‘I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. ⁵ I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.’” ⁶ And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.” ⁷ Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, ⁸ thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.” ⁹ And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD (Yahweh) who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. ¹¹ Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. ¹² But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’”

Jacob in effect asks the Yahweh figure who had promised protection in Gen 28:10-22 to honor that promise. We as readers can therefore securely link the Yahweh of these two passages together. Again, that might seem self evident, but it becomes important for what follows. Jacob gets his confirmation in the same chapter:

²² The same night he [Jacob] arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷ And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip on the sinew of the thigh.

Once again we need to make some observations. First, in Genesis 32:1-2, Jacob was met by divine council members, the “angels of God”—the same phrase used for the beings he saw in his “ladder” vision. The meeting must have been encouraging since it was proof that the high God was near. Second, Genesis 32 makes it apparent that the

“man” with whom Jacob wrestled was a divine being. The being himself says “you have striven with God (*elohim*).” Jacob takes the divine figure at his word and considers himself to have struggled with God or a god (“I have seen *elohim* face-to-face”). Third, this was a physical struggle, where the *elohim* was in tangible, corporeal form. This went well beyond a vision.

Given the ground we have covered in this chapter already, it should be apparent that this *elohim* might be the “other Yahweh” that keeps appearing to the patriarchs. Some might object to that idea by noting that nowhere in this episode do we see the name Yahweh used of the being with whom Jacob wrestled. It is certainly possible that this omission could rule out the co-regent figure, meaning that Jacob wrestled with some other divine council *elohim*. However, an identification with “THE” Angel is suggested by the prophet Hosea’s recounting of the episode in Hosea 12:3-4.⁸⁸ Note the literary technique Hosea uses to create parallel thoughts:

In the womb he [Jacob] took his brother by the heel;

and in his manhood he strove [Hebrew, *sarah*] with God [*elohim*].

Yes, he strove [Hebrew, *sarah*] with an angel [*mal’ak*],
and prevailed:

he wept, and made supplication to him;
he found him in Bethel, and there he spoke with us.

This parallelism doesn’t nail down an identification with the “other Yahweh,” since we know mere angels at times did take physical form (Genesis 18-19). However, it is possible—and I would argue quite probable, based on what follows below—that we are once again dealing with the second Yahweh.

In Genesis 35 we read of Jacob himself recounting this event—or one of the events of Genesis 32. Genesis 35:1-7 reads:

¹ God (*elohim*) said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God (*el*) who appeared (a *singular* verbal form) to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” ² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods (*elohim*) that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments.” ³ Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God (*el*) who answered (a *singular* verbal form) me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” ⁴ So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. ⁵ And as they journeyed, the terror of God (*elohim*) fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. ⁶ And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, ⁷ and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because

there God (*ha-elohim*) had been revealed (a *plural* verbal form) to him when he fled from his brother.

This is an intriguing passage. What is recounted here is not looking back to the “Jacob’s ladder” incident since Jacob was not fleeing from Esau (35:1) when that incident occurred. The underlining above serves to indicate that fact that, in verses 1 and 4 Jacob refers to a *lone* deity (*el* + singular verbal form) who had appeared to him when fleeing from Esau. But in verse seven, a plural verb form makes it possible that Jacob is also remembering a time when the gods (*elohim*) of the council (plural) appeared to him.

Since Genesis 28 (the “ladder” incident) is ruled out, the only possible events Jacob is recalling are those of Genesis 32. In Gen. 32:1-2 the “angels of God” met him, and then he encounters the divine “man.” It may be that the wording of Genesis 35 speaks of both situations, and so the singular and the plural are understandable and appropriate.

However, for technical reasons, it is also possible that the plural here may still only refer to the one deity figure of Genesis 32. Notice that I double-underlined “God” in verse 7. The reason was because “God” in that verse is not just *elohim*, it is *ha-elohim*. Recall that in Chapter 2 we saw that when *elohim* is preceded by the definite article (the word “the”; *ha-* in Hebrew), it is a signal that “THE” God par excellence is in view. Consequently, a literal translation would be “and there he [Jacob] built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there “*THE* God (*elohim*) had been revealed to him when he fled from his brother.” And in every other instance in the entire Hebrew Bible of the word *elohim* being preceded by the article, when a singular divine entity is referred to, it is *THE elohim* of Israel.

The point here is that, if *THE elohim* of Israel is being referred to here, then it was *THE elohim* of Israel who wrestled with Jacob. Other aspects of Genesis 35 confirm this. In verses 1 and 4 we have the word *el* used for “God.” In both instances, *el* is preceded by the definite article—and so those verses are referring to the appearance of *THE* God (*ha-el*) of Israel. Second, Jacob notes that this God was the one who “has been with me wherever I have gone.” This statement hearkens back to the original promise of Genesis 28 and its reiteration in Genesis 32. In the former the promising deity was visible; in the latter he was visible and physical.

One final evidence seals this identification. In what might be the most startling passage in the Hebrew Bible for identifying the unseen, “unembodied” Yahweh with his visible self, the “second Yahweh,” we turn to Gen. 48:15-16 for Jacob’s deathbed words of blessing to Joseph’s children:

¹ After this, Joseph was told, “Behold, your father is ill.” So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. ² And it was told to Jacob, “Your son Joseph has come to you.” Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. ³ And Jacob said to Joseph, “God Almighty (El Shaddai) appeared to me at Luz (Bethel)⁸⁹ in the land of Canaan and blessed me, ⁴ and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.’” ⁵

And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. ⁶ And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance. ⁷ As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).” ⁸ When Israel saw Joseph’s sons, he said, “Who are these?” ⁹ Joseph said to his father, “They are my sons, whom God has given me here.” And he said, “Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them.” ¹⁰ Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them. ¹¹ And Israel said to Joseph, “I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also.” ¹² Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. ¹³ And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel’s left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel’s right hand, and brought them near him. ¹⁴ And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn). ¹⁵ And he blessed Joseph and said,

“The God (*ha-elohim*) before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
The God (*ha-elohim*) who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day,
¹⁶ The Angel (*ha-mal’ak*) who has redeemed me from all evil,

May he bless the boys ...

The parallel position of *ha-elohim* and *ha-mal’ak* (“Angel”) is explicit. Since the Bible very clearly teaches that God is eternal and existed before all things, and that angels are created beings, the point of this explicit parallel is not to say that God is an angel. On the other hand, it affirms that *this* Angel is God (note that the article *ha-* is attached to the name of both figures). The two are fused not only because of the parallel, but because of something you can’t see in the English translation. The verb “bless” underlined above is *not plural*, which would indicate two different persons are being asked to bless the boys—it is *singular*, thereby telegraphing a tight *fusion* of the two divine beings on the part of the author.

As we leave this chapter, the implications of what we’ve seen are staggering. The patriarchal stories, so often the subject of bedtime Bible reading, create an astonishing picture for us. I’ve characterized the second Yahweh in some respects as Yahweh’s “assistant.” That is certainly true on one level, for he is Yahweh’s Messenger. He is more than that, though. In subsequent chapters we’ll see that the second Yahweh is a lieutenant and co-ruler as well. We saw in Genesis 1 that God’s original goal was to have co-rulers on earth who were part of his larger divine council administration. After the Fall this had to be reclaimed; humans had to be redeemed back into God’s council-family. The second Yahweh is essentially God’s heavenly co-ruler *and* his chosen means to appear among humans. This is complex Old Testament theology, but as we see God’s plan for joint rule

on earth (his earthly kingdom) play out under Moses, the Judges, and the Israelite king, the patterns will become clear. For now, we need to start thinking of the second Yahweh in simple terms: Yahweh's Word, his Messenger, and his co-ruler.

There is still so much more to the story. We'll meet the Angel again . . . in some very unexpected places.

⁸³ Recall that English translations represent the divine name "Yahweh" LORD in all capital letters.

⁸⁴ When Jesus says "I am" (instead of the expected, "I was"), he is taking for himself the name of God revealed to Moses in Exodus 3 at the burning bush incident. There God said his name was "I am" (Exo. 3:14).

⁸⁵ By the way, this triangulation of John 8:56 and Genesis 15:1ff. is what Paul was referencing in Galatians 3:8, where he says that the gospel—that God would justify the Gentile nations—was preached to Abraham. Christ, the Word, came to Abraham and told him that through him the other nations would be blessed (cf. Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-6). Paul sees this as speaking of the Gentiles being brought into God's family ("sons of God") through Christ's work on the cross.

⁸⁶ The two powers in heaven is not evidence of dualism (a good god versus an ultimate evil god, who are evenly matched) because both these powers accepted in Judaism are good. The two powers idea has received a lot of scholarly attention. For more discussion,

⁸⁷ Although it is true that the divine name Yahweh never comes from Abraham's mouth in this chapter (he uses the generic "lord" [adonay] instead of Yahweh), Genesis 18:25 suggests strongly that Abraham knew who he was talking to was Yahweh. After *twice* saying "far be it from *you*" he refers to him as "the Judge of all the earth."

⁸⁸ Verses 4-5 in the Hebrew text.

⁸⁹ Luz is Bethel, as is demonstrated by comparing Gen 28:19; 35:6; 48:3; Judg 1:23.

Chapter 11

Seeing God's Name

For those who may not recall, the biblical story of the patriarchs ended on a sour note. In Genesis 37-50 we find the story of Joseph, one of the more inspirational in the entire Bible. This favored son of the patriarch Jacob went from being sold into slavery by his brothers to the pinnacle of power in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. But as the next book of the Old Testament notes ominously, a new Pharaoh came along who didn't know Joseph and who had no regard for his family, now grown into a very large population in the land they had been given during Joseph's life.

The growth of the family of Jacob into the people of Israel frightened the Pharaoh deeply. The Israelites were perceived as a threat to his power, and so the saying that the embodied Word had given originally to Abraham centuries before came to pass: "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years" (Gen 15:13). But there was a flip side to that dark oracle: "But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions" (Gen 15:14). Out of the misery of Egypt God would bring the promised seed line, all in due time. That time came beginning with a familiar Old Testament story—but a story so familiar that amazing truths escape our attention.

The Burning Bush

The story of the exodus from Egypt really begins in chapter 3 of the book by that name. Moses' encounter with the divine at the burning bush has been etched into our minds by Sunday School teachers, ministers and, of course, Cecil B. DeMille's epic film, *The Ten Commandments*. Incredibly, though, you may never have noticed what really happened at that event unless you were paying very close attention to the biblical text. Hollywood certainly didn't tell us everything. Noting my underlining once again:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the LORD (Yahweh) saw that he turned aside to see, God (Elohim) called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "I am the God (Elohim) of your father, the God (Elohim) of Abraham, the God (Elohim) of Isaac, and

the God (Elohim) of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God (Elohim). ⁷ Then the LORD (Yahweh) said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” ¹¹ But Moses said to God (Elohim), “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” ¹² He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.” ¹³ Then Moses said to God (Elohim), “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴ God (Elohim) said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD (Yahweh), the God (Elohim) of your fathers, the God (Elohim) of Abraham, the God (Elohim) of Isaac, and the God (Elohim) of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. ¹⁶ Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, ¹⁷ and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.”’ ¹⁸ And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’ ¹⁹ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. ²⁰ So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. ²¹ And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, ²² but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

The first thing to notice is that God isn’t alone in the burning bush. The second Yahweh—the Yahweh humans could visually discern—is in the bush as well. The passage clearly has both the Angel (Exod 3:2) and Yahweh (the LORD; Exod. 3:4) in the bush. The fact that Exod 4:4 says that “the LORD (Yahweh) saw that he [Moses] turned

aside to see” the bush does not mean Yahweh was standing somewhere else watching the reaction of Moses, for the verse continues to say that God (Elohim) called to Moses *from out of the bush*. This God is then identified as Yahweh in verses 7 and 141-5, when he reveals his name. The invisible Yahweh and the visible Yahweh figure are both there.

The New Testament affirms this explanation in Acts 7:30-35. The martyr Stephen says in that text:

³⁰“Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him [Moses] in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord. ³²‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’ ³⁵“This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.

As with the account in Exodus 3, this passage tightly identified the Angel with Yahweh without making them completely identical. And yet the idea that they are inseparable in nature is subtly communicated.

There is something a bit unusual about the language in Exodus 3. We are told the Angel appeared “in a flame of fire in a bush.” This is unusual in that, Yahweh’s Angel typically appears in human form, not some other visible form, like a flame. We have two choices with respect to understanding this wording. One option is that the Angel in typical human form appeared in the flames of a fire. There’s nothing to suggest this isn’t what happened, though we are accustomed to thinking that Moses just saw fire. We may just need to adjust our thinking about this episode. The other option requires that you recall a point I made in Chapter 3 when I was discussing the meaning of the “image of God.” I said that, based on a point of Hebrew grammar, the literal phrase “*in the image of God*” was better translated “*as the image of God*.” I illustrated how even in English the preposition “in” can mean “as” or “in the capacity of.” The same preposition is found here in Exod. 3:2 where we read that the Angel of Yahweh appeared to Moses “in a flame of fire in a bush.” I would suggest that the phrase be translated “*as a flame of fire in a bush*.” The result is that the means by which the Angel, the second Yahweh, chose to appear to Moses was a flame of fire. This would mean that the Angel himself could alter his own means of appearance.

My preference is for the first option—that Moses saw a human form in the fire. The language reminds one of the episode of Daniel’s three friends in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3), where Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth figure in the fire, one who was “like a son of the gods.” We can’t make too much of Nebuchadnezzar’s statements since, as a pagan, he wouldn’t be a reliable source for Israelite theology. Nevertheless, Daniel 3:28 has

Nebuchadnezzar interpreting this sighting as an appearance of Yahweh's angel. This could be the writer's literary means of directing the reader's attention back to the appearances of the Angel of Yahweh in the older Old Testament books, and even specifically to Exodus 3. At any rate, the Angel and Yahweh are closely connected and, in this instance, connected with fire.

The Name Invisible and Visible

There is a second clue to discerning that the Old Testament writer linked the Angel and Yahweh. As we read the account, it is unmistakable that the visible flame and the voice of God are fused in the mind of Moses (and so the reader). It is also quite obvious that the name behind this voice is Yahweh. Neither Moses nor we can separate the flame, the voice, and the name. The name of Yahweh and the Angel are thus fused by the writer. Yahweh says "I AM WHO I AM . . . this is my name forever." In other words, the name is who Yahweh is. The "Name" is a means of describing Yahweh's essential being. We ask a person's name to identify that person. When Moses asks Yahweh's name for a means of conveying his identity, he is told "I AM WHO I AM." If we asked Yahweh who he is, he'd say "I AM."

It's hard to wrap our minds around this kind of language and its implications. Perhaps the easiest way to put it is that the Name is Yahweh's essence. This perspective can help us understand how it is that a distinct being like the Angel or the Word "is and yet isn't" Yahweh. The essence of Yahweh functions separately from Yahweh and can be embodied. When the invisible Yahweh and the second Yahweh figure that is visible are both present, both are Yahweh's essence, but only one is detectable to the human eye. Let's unpack all this a bit.

Sometimes the Name isn't necessarily visible, but the Name functions as a substitute word for "Yahweh" and is described in personhood terms. If you have Jewish friends who are serious about their Judaism, this idea isn't so unfamiliar. Modern Jews who seek to avoid using the word "Yahweh" in conversation (lest they take it in vain) substitute *ha-Shem* for the divine name, a phrase which is Hebrew for "the Name." The Old Testament has this same kind of substitution in places, where the reader can tell the Name is a person. Isaiah 30:27-28 is quite striking in this regard:

²⁷ Behold, the Name of the LORD comes from afar, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke; his lips are full of fury, and his tongue is like a devouring fire; ²⁸ his breath is like an overflowing stream that reaches up to the neck; to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction, and to place on the jaws of the peoples a bridle that leads astray.

Other passages convey the "Name as person" idea through parallel lines. In Psalm 20, verses 1 and 7 we read:

¹ May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!
May the name of the God of Jacob protect you!

- ⁷ Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

The idea of Psalm 20:1, that Yahweh can bring deliverance, is familiar. But doesn't it sound odd that the psalmist would pray that "the Name" protect anyone? Israelites in need of protection wouldn't be trusting a string of consonants (Y-H-W-H) to help them! The psalm indicates that "the Name" is another way of saying "Yahweh." When the psalmist "trusts in the Name," he is trusting in Yahweh. Psalm 44:4-5 conveys the same idea:

- ⁴ You are my King, O God;
ordain salvation for Jacob!
⁵ Through you we push down our foes;
through your name we tread down those who rise up against us.

Again, the Israelites aren't trusting four consonants to tread down their enemies! They are trusting the Name, and the Name *is* Yahweh. Isaiah 60:8-9 is also worth looking at:

- ⁸ Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? ⁹ For the coastlands shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them,
for the Name of the LORD your God,
and for the Holy One of Israel,
because he has made you beautiful.

Note the last line in Isaiah 60:9 – "for *he* has made you beautiful." The prophet speaks of one person here—the Holy One of Israel, who is also known as "the Name of the Lord."

Deuteronomy has a lot to say about the Name, especially with respect to the Name being the presence of God which will reside in the tabernacle, the holy city, and eventually the temple. Deuteronomy 12 is representative:⁹⁰

- ¹ These are the laws and rules that you must carefully observe in the land that the Lord, God of your fathers, is giving you to possess, as long as you live on earth . . . ⁴ Do not worship the Lord your God in like manner, ⁵ but look only to the site that the Lord your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there. There you are to go, ⁶ and there you are to bring your burnt offerings and other sacrifices, your tithes and contributions, your votive and freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks . . . ¹¹ you must bring everything that I command you to the site where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name: your burnt offerings and other sacrifices, your tithes and contributions, and all the choice votive offerings that you vow to the Lord.

In these instances, the Name is a substitute term for Yahweh. There is interchangeability since the Name is Yahweh's essence. But the Israelite also described the Name in visible terms, and so in some passages the Name refers to a second Yahweh figure. For example,

the demands of Deuteronomy 12 are taken up by Solomon, builder of the Jerusalem temple. At the dedication ceremony for the temple in I Kings 8-9 we read:

8: ¹ Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. ² And all the men of Israel assembled to King Solomon at the feast in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month. ³ And all the elders of Israel came, and the priests took up the ark. ⁴ And they brought up the ark of the LORD, the tent of meeting, and all the holy vessels that were in the tent; the priests and the Levites brought them up. ⁵ And King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel, who had assembled before him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered. ⁶ Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. ⁷ For the cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark, so that the cherubim overshadowed the ark and its poles. ⁸ And the poles were so long that the ends of the poles were seen from the Holy Place before the inner sanctuary; but they could not be seen from outside. And they are there to this day. ⁹ There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses put there at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the people of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt. ¹⁰ And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹ so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. ¹² Then Solomon said, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. ¹³ I have indeed built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever" . . . ²² Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven, ²³ and said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴ who have kept with your servant David my father what you declared to him. You spoke with your mouth, and with your hand have fulfilled it this day. ²⁵ Now therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father what you have promised him, saying, 'You shall not lack a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' ²⁶ Now therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you have spoken to your servant David my father. ²⁷ "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! ²⁸ Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, ²⁹ that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you

have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place . . .

9: ¹As soon as Solomon had finished building the house of the LORD and the king’s house and all that Solomon desired to build, ²the LORD appeared to Solomon a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. ³And the LORD said to him, “I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you have made before me. I have consecrated this house that you have built, by putting my name there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time.

Notice that Yahweh “appears” to Solomon in these passages. The appearance is in the form of a cloud (8:10). After the “glory cloud” fills the temple, Yahweh declares that his Name will now take residence in the temple. The implication is that the Name *is* the glory that is being veiled by the cloud. The cloud is visible but yet obscures direct contact with the “essence” of Yahweh, the Name.

The Name and the Angel

Perhaps the most dramatic example where the Name, the essence of Yahweh, is visually manifested and perhaps even embodied is Exodus 23:20-22. Speaking to Moses God said:

²⁰“Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ²¹Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. ²²“But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

For certain this is no ordinary angel. This Angel has the authority to pardon sins or withhold pardon, a status that belongs to God. We saw earlier in Genesis 48:15-16 that this Angel was referred to as God. In Genesis 31, a passage I didn’t bring into the earlier discussion of the Angel, we have an explicit equation of the Angel and the God of Israel. Jacob explains to Rachel and Leah why their uncle, Laban, had come to be angry with him. Jacob informs them that God had supernaturally made Jacob’s flocks increase in number, no matter how many times Laban changed the terms. When Laban decided all the spotted calves would belong to Jacob, God had those calves multiplied. The same thing happened when Laban changed the terms to striped calves. Jacob relates the dream in which God told him all this would happen:

¹¹ Then the Angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am!’ ¹² And he said, ‘Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. ¹³ I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.’” (Genesis 31:11-13, ESV)

The Angel who speaks to Jacob in a dream identifies himself as the God of Bethel. Note that the Angel does *not* use the third person, as though talking *about* God. He does not say, “thus says the Lord, I am the God of Bethel.” Rather, he uses the first person (“*I am* the God of Bethel”). Even more precisely, the Angel adds that he is the God of Bethel “where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me.”

Exodus 23:20-22 is making the same kind of Angel / God of Israel connection. The Angel that Yahweh sends before Moses and the nation *has Yahweh’s name in him*. In other words, Yahweh is in this human-like being who leads the people of Israel into the Promised Land.

Getting a grasp of the Name invisible and visible and the relationship of the invisible Name and the visible Angel helps us wade through some other tricky passages—in both testaments. By way of illustration, you may be wondering how Moses and other people in the Old Testament could see Yahweh and converse with him and not violate the biblical statements that no one can see God or his face and live. For instance, in Exodus 33:20 Moses himself is told, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” Didn’t Moses see the face of God at the burning bush? The short answer is No—he saw the Angel (and presumably the Angel’s face, as other patriarchs had done). The Angel is the visible Yahweh, not the invisible Yahweh? But, you might then ask, what sense does it make to say no one can see an invisible being’s face—that makes no sense. On the surface it doesn’t, but let’s unpack it a bit.

A good time after Moses encountered the Angel and Yahweh at the burning bush, he made an unusual request of Yahweh in Exodus 33:18, “please show me your glory.” What had Moses not seen that he now wanted to see? What makes the request even more odd is that Moses had regular meetings with Yahweh after the burning bush episode:

Exodus 33:7-11

⁷ Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD (Yahweh) would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. ⁸ Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. ⁹ When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD (Hebrew, “he”) would speak with Moses. ¹⁰ And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. ¹¹ Thus the LORD (Yahweh) used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

One important observation here is that, despite the text's statement that God spoke with Moses "face to face" (Exo. 33:11) the text is also quite clear that *Moses was speaking to a cloud*. Consequently, "face to face" conversation with God need *not* mean that Moses saw God's face. Moses was clearly speaking to someone veiled inside the cloud. Numbers 12:4-8 might also help a bit:

Numbers 12:4-8

⁴ And suddenly the LORD (Yahweh) said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." And the three of them came out. ⁵ And the LORD (Yahweh) came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. ⁶ And he said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD (Yahweh) make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. ⁷ Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. ⁸ With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

According to verse 8, Moses saw and spoke with "*the form of the LORD*." This comment needs to be interpreted alongside the verses that precede it. Since verse 5 is clear that Yahweh was, as at other times, in the pillar of cloud, it seems that what is meant is that the cloud was a visible manifestation of Yahweh. Prior to Moses, this kind of contact is rare in the Bible. With Moses, though, the contact seems daily. Again we note that the expression "face to face" need not require the notion that Moses saw the "literal" face of God. It points to proximity or, in the case of the regularity of Moses' encounters, even intimacy, not literal "eye contact." The same would be true of the "mouth to mouth" description in verse 8.

The point here is that the Hebrew word "face" (*panim*) need not refer to the front part of a literal human head that has two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. It often refers to a person's immediate *presence*.⁹¹ Moses had seen the cloud that veiled Yahweh. He had seen the Angel, the "humanoid veil" of Yahweh. What he had never experienced, and what he asked to experience, was the direct presence of Yahweh. Yahweh had to deny Moses' request—for his own good—but offered a compromise of sorts:

Exodus 33:18-23

¹⁸ Moses said, "Please show me your glory." ¹⁹ And he (God) said, "I will make all my goodness (or, beauty⁹²) pass before you and will declare the name of the LORD. And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face (*panim*), for man shall not see me and live." ²¹ And the LORD (Yahweh) said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have

passed by.²³ Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

The reply is interesting, to say the least. Moses knew the Name was in the Angel (Exod 23:20-23), and he had of course seen the Angel. Here Yahweh more or less says, “Okay, I’ll let you see my beauty, but what that really amounts to is letting you see my Name, but that’s still going to be cloaked by a human form.” We aren’t told how this particular humanoid manifestation of Yahweh was different than the Angel, but Moses seemed to go away satisfied. He knew he was going to see what was “inside” the Angel, albeit through yet another filter, and that was the most that could be done for his own protection. Yahweh must be cloaked for human eyes.

Let’s catch our breath a bit! This chapter and the one previous bring into view some observations that are very important for much of what we’ll cover the rest of our journey. First, it is the Old Testament, not the New, where the idea of different *deity-persons*, sharing one essential *nature*, and who function in a *godhead* is first introduced. Second, since the God of Israel is uncreated and distinct from all things physical, he is by nature invisible, disembodied, and incomprehensible as he is to human beings. Consequently, he often chooses to interact with human beings in ways that humans can visually process, such as a flame or a cloud, but at other times in human appearance (e.g., the Angel). Third, the disembodied Yahweh and the visible, detectable Yahweh may be present at the same time. These theological threads not only enable us to discern what’s going on in some puzzling Old Testament narratives. They sharpen our senses to the bigger picture of God’s plan for restoring his rule to earth and humankind as his council imagers.

⁹⁰ Need to interact briefly with the recent work of Richter here, and reviews of her work.

⁹¹ The standard Hebrew lexicons (BDB, HALOT) make it clear that “presence” or “in the presence of” is often the meaning of *panim*.

⁹² See Hosea 10:11 for this meaning of the word behind the ESV’s “goodness.”

Chapter 12

Growing Pains

The incident at the burning bush marks a turning in the Old Testament story. Yahweh's call of Moses sets in motion a series of events that culminate with the exodus from Egypt and the birth of the nation of Israel. In fact, that's probably the way most readers have been taught to process the events in the book of Exodus. These thoughts are of course true, but they fall far short of how all this fits into the cosmic narrative of the Old Testament. There is so much more going on.

In the early chapters of this book we learned about God's divine family, the divine council, and how it was God's intention to create and nurture his human "sons" on earth. These humans would live where God lived, and interact with God's divine children, since Eden was the place of council. God's human children would be, in effect, members of his ruling council administration, stewarding the earth as though God were physically doing so. The divine members of the council had their imaging tasks, and humans had imaging tasks—and together they would be one family under the Lord of the council, who would interact with them by various visible and more intimate means that the humans could comprehend and withstand. God wanted earthly and divine united in one family, living in the place where heaven and earth met.

All of this was destroyed by the Fall and the judgment rendered on the nations of the earth at the Tower of Babel. After the latter, God was, in terms of the human race, childless—until he called Abraham and started over on his plan to have a people and a kingdom of his own on earth. Yahweh nurtured and protected Abraham and his descendants, at times doing so by means of direct contact through the Angel. Eventually, this preservation took Jacob and his family to Egypt, where they were saved from famine through the administration of Joseph in Pharaoh's court. But, as the beginning of the book of Exodus ominously reports, "There arose a Pharaoh who didn't know Joseph." Abraham's descendants became the slaves of the Egyptians, a people whom Yahweh had disowned, and who worshipped gods inferior to Yahweh whom Yahweh had appointed for Egypt as part of the judgment of Babel. And there they stayed for over 400 years.

When Yahweh spoke to Moses out of the burning bush as Moses beheld the form of the Angel, it marked a return to the days of the ancient patriarchs and to the plan for Yahweh's rule on earth. The book of Exodus contains a number of references to the divine council themes we just traced in the paragraphs above. Most of them are lost in casual reading, but they are vital for understanding the progression of the divine plan through the history of Israel and through the pages of the New Testament.

Israel is My Son

Anyone who has seen the film *The Ten Commandments* recalls the drama of the scene where Moses stands before Pharaoh and demands, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let my people go!” It’s clear to us that Moses is God’s messenger, and that Israel is God’s people. But the movie fails to capture the impact of this confrontation conveyed by Scripture in the context of all that has transpired before it in the cosmic narrative.

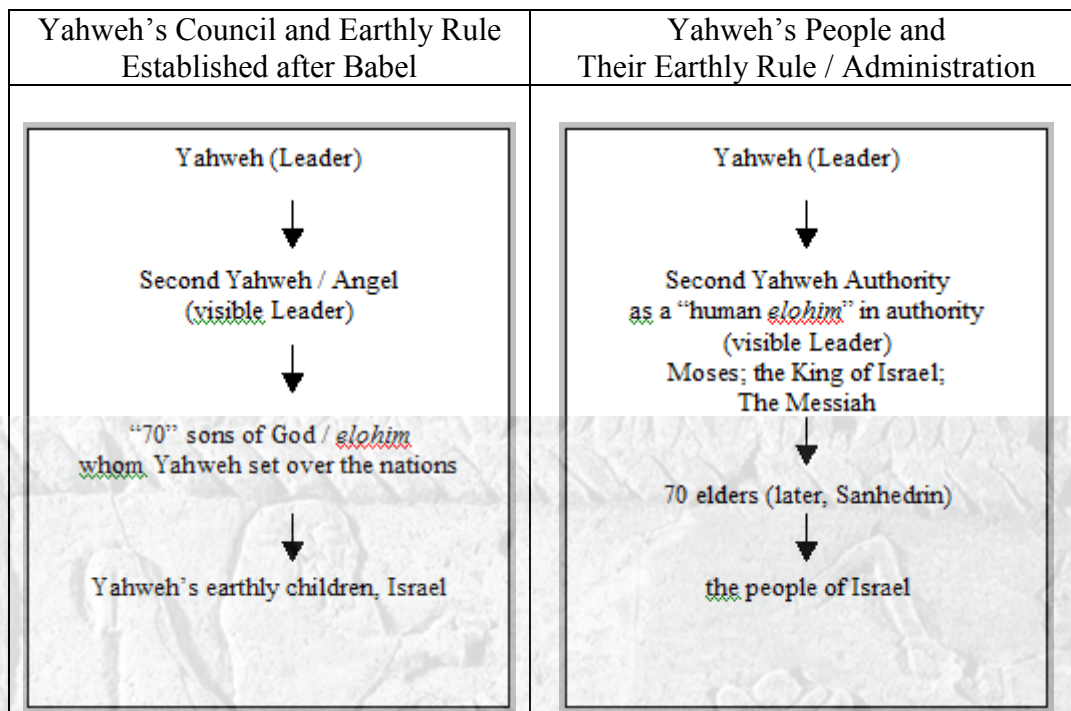
For example, when Moses stood before Pharaoh he came not as a mere messenger. Rather, he came as an *elohim*. In Yahweh’s own words to Moses, “See, I have made you as God [*elohim*] to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet” (Exod 7:1). As the Angel was the physical representation of Yahweh to Moses, so Moses would be the physical representation of Yahweh to Pharaoh—and to Aaron and the other Israelites (cp. Exod 4:16). This is something our English translations miss completely.

Another item that is easily missed, though it is captured in English translation, is found in Exodus 4:21-22:

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son.’ ²³ and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’ ”

This language is echoed in Hosea 11:1, a passage to which Matthew attributes prophetic significance, but which was originally looking back in time to the exodus: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt have I called my son.”

The choice of words may strike us as curious, but it is significant. This is actually the first in a series of textual clues in Exodus that the structure of God’s kingdom rule on earth would mirror that of the divine council in heaven. The chart below illustrates this point and telegraphs some of the clues we’ll note in this chapter:



The idea that a human being would function as an *elohim* under Yahweh's authority is modeled after the divine council structure of the invisible and visible Yahweh. Later in the Old Testament, this "human as *elohim*" idea will form the basis for Yahweh calling Israel's king "my son" (Psalm 2:7) and for the additional notion that the Messiah would not only be the son of God, but would be identified with Israel itself, who was Yahweh's child, according to the worldview of Deut. 32:8-9.

You may recall that in our discussion of Deut. 32:8-9 I mentioned that the number of nations "given up" by Yahweh at the judgment of Babel was seventy. I also mentioned that, in an effort to deny there are other *elohim* in a heavenly council, some commentators try to argue that Psalm 82 describes Israel's council of seventy (the Sanhedrin). We saw that such a view made little sense, since at no time in the Scriptures did Israel's elders ever have jurisdiction over all the nations of the earth. But there is a correlation between the seventy elders of Israel and the divine council, and it is telegraphed in our chart.

The number of the sons of God after the judgment at Babel was seventy (to correspond to the nations), and this was the same number assigned by Jewish tradition to the membership of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Judaism. The number of the elders is based on two passages. Exodus 18 recounts Jethro's advice to Moses (the "human *elohim*") to select men to help him govern the people of Israel. No number is given in that passage, but in Exodus 24:1-2, 9 we read:

Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. ² Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people

shall not come up with him.” . . . ⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.

The wording suggests that these seventy elders were drawn from a larger group. This is consistent with the heavenly council, for it is evident that there are more than seventy sons of God. There were seventy set over the nations, but they became corrupt and are the object of the sentencing of Psalm 82. There are other references to sons of God who remain loyal to Yahweh. The point to notice, though, is “as in heaven, so on earth.” There is a structural relationship between the council in heaven and the administration of God’s people on earth.

These sorts of details are lost to us, as we are sadly unfamiliar with divine council motifs in the Bible. They would not be lost to an ancient culture familiar with the cosmic storyline of the Bible. And there’s more.

Who Is Yahweh?

As dramatic as the account of Israel’s escape from Egypt is, certain features of it take on more color when close attention is paid to the text and the cosmic background of the event can be appreciated.

Pharaoh, as we know, was unresponsive to the command of God through Moses to release His son, Israel. The result was a series of plagues. Pharaoh had sarcastically asked Moses, “Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go?” He got an answer to his question in unmistakable terms.

The Bible tells us that the plagues were aimed at Egypt’s gods (Exod 12:12; Num 33:4), those *elohim* who had been given their authority by Yahweh and who were supposed to govern Egypt on his behalf, but who became corrupt and received the worship due to their superior. From the 4th dynasty onward in Egypt, Pharaoh was considered the son of the high God Re. In this role Pharaoh was perceived as the maintainer of the cosmic order established by Re at the creation. Yahweh showed himself superior to both Pharaoh and Re by undoing the cosmic order, putting the land into chaos. Yahweh’s chosen human representative, Moses, had the kind of power the false god Re was supposed to wield and grant his alleged son, the Pharaoh.

Not only were the plagues designed to show the superiority of Yahweh to all the gods and convince Pharaoh that Yahweh was the God of gods, but it was also designed to declare the same thing to all the peoples of the surrounding countries. When Moses met up with Jethro after the crossing the of Red Sea, Jethro told him, “Now I know that the LORD (Yahweh) is greater than all the gods (*ha-elohim*)” (Exod 18:11a).

On the other side of the Red Sea, Moses and the people of Israel sang the praises of the unmatched Yahweh. This song is recorded for us in Exodus 15. In Exodus 15:11

Moses asks, “Who is like you, O LORD (Yahweh), among the gods (*elim*)?” The answer, of course, is “none.” As I noted in Chapter Two, this praise is reduced to cheap triviality if one denies the existence of other gods. Moses might as well have asked what cartoon characters were as powerful as Yahweh. Without the cosmic backdrop, the praise is meaningless.

The Destroying Angel

The final plague, the death of the firstborn, was particularly aimed at Egypt’s gods. God told Moses, “For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD” (Exod. 12:12; cp. Num 33:4).

It is in this tragic judgment that we see a different side of a now familiar personage, the Angel of Yahweh. To this point, the Angel has been a figure of hope and protection. Not so on the night of the Passover. We read in Exod. 12:23, “For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you.” Obviously, there is no explicit reference to the Angel here. However, the word translated “destroyer” here, *mashchit*, gives us a clue as to who the destroyer was. This word occurs only a few times in the Hebrew Old Testament. When it refers to a divine judgment being carried out, there is only this passage and two others: 2 Sam. 24:16 and 1 Chron 21:15, which are two accounts of the same incident. 2 Samuel 24:16 reads:

And when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the calamity and said to the angel, the destroyer (*mashchit*) among the people, “It is enough; now stay your hand.” And the angel of the LORD (Yahweh) was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

It is not an accident that the destroying angel is identified as the Angel of Yahweh. The visible Yahweh carried out such destruction on behalf of Israel on other occasions. For example, Isaiah 37:36 informs us: “And the angel of the LORD (Yahweh) went out and struck down a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.”

The Delivering Angel

The Angel was active in the exodus event itself. The deliverance from Egypt is described in Exodus 13-14, a large portion of which is reproduced below:

Exodus 13:17-22

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, “Lest the people change

their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.”¹⁸ But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.¹⁹ Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.”²⁰ And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.²¹ And the LORD (Yahweh) went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.²² The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

Exodus 14

Then the LORD said to Moses,² “Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea.”³ For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’⁴ And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.” And they did so.⁵ When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, “What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?”⁶ So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him,⁷ and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.⁸ And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly.⁹ The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.¹⁰ When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD.¹¹ They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?”¹² Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”¹³ And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again.¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”¹⁵ The LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward.¹⁶ Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground.¹⁷ And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen.¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”¹⁹ Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved

from before them and stood behind them, ²⁰ coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. ²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. ²² And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. ²⁴ And in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, ²⁵ clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians." ²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the LORD threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. ²⁹ But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. ³⁰ Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

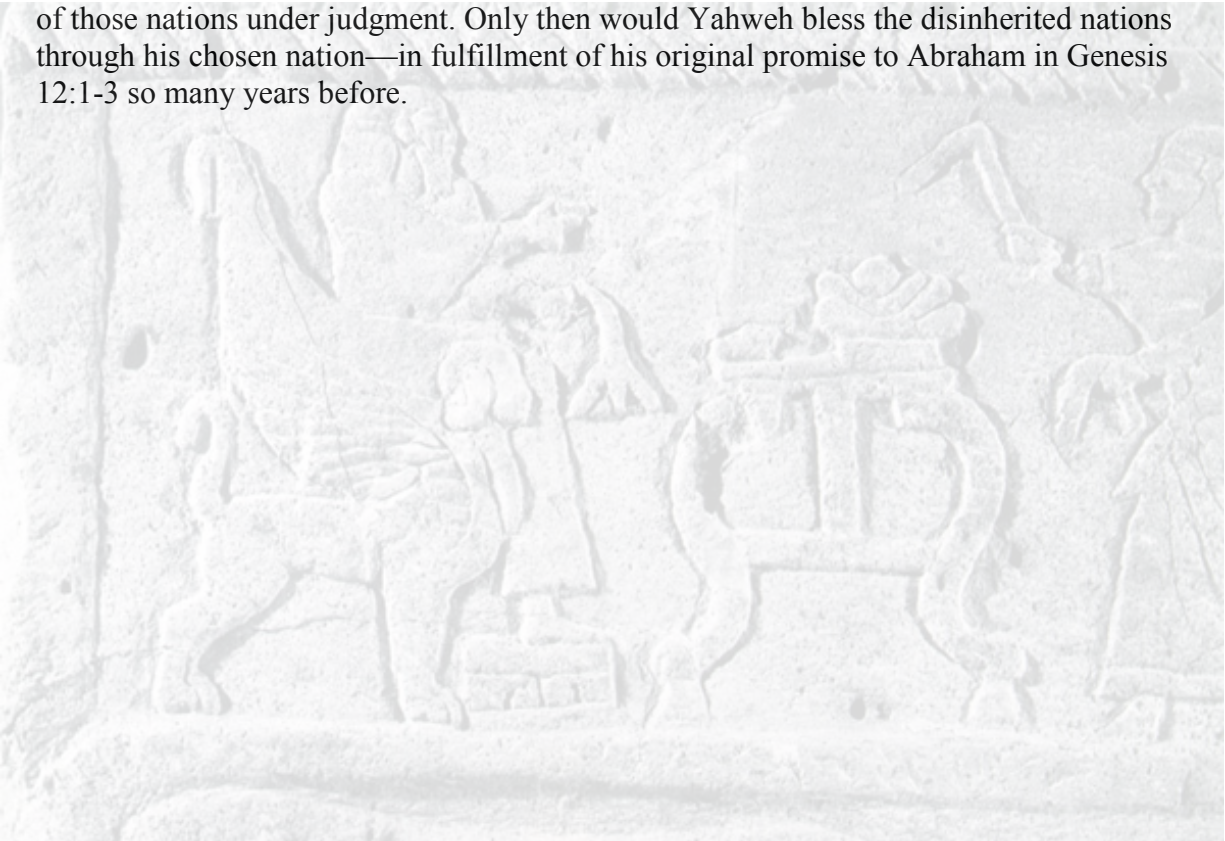
We learn from this passage that both the invisible Yahweh and the now familiar visible Yahweh were both present at the crossing of the sea, the greatest miracle in the Old Testament. The invisible Yahweh, veiled by cloud and fire, led the liberated captives so they could travel day and night (Exod 13:17-22)—and he wasn't alone. When the Israelites were trapped at the sea *both* the invisible Yahweh and the visible Yahweh (the Angel) moved from the front where *they* were leading the procession to take up position behind the people (Exod 14:19-20). Together they stood between Israel and Pharaoh's army, throwing Pharaoh's horsemen into chaos.

I can only speak for myself, but for many years I had no idea that the Angel, Yahweh in human form, was present with the invisible Yahweh at this dramatic event. Despite the fact that there is probably no more familiar incident in the Old Testament—one that just about everyone has heard of—I had missed the Angel and the transparent reference to both Yahweh figures present at the same place and at the same time. I had also never heard anyone point out how this pivotal episode in the cosmic narrative supported the idea of a godhead due to the Angel's identity as the visible Yahweh. But it was there the whole time.

As I noted at the start of this chapter, most Bible readers think of the exodus and the burning bush incident as the birth of the nation of Israel. In light of how the book of Exodus develops and uses certain divine council themes, it might be more accurate to say that Exodus gives us the *rebirth* of the people of Yahweh as his earthly council imagers

and participants. The plan of Yahweh to reverse the effects of the Fall and the scattering of the nations through his chosen “portion” of Israel gets moving again in this important Old Testament book. Israel is Yahweh’s reborn son, free to worship the one who conquers other gods.

But this rebirth had a purpose beyond Israel’s own status as Yahweh’s chosen portion. The next chapter outlines another theme brought to bear in Exodus that is just as important to understanding the cosmic narrative of the Bible. It is in the book of Exodus where we first discover that Israel is to be a “kingdom of priests.” Israel’s rebirth would also be the key to redeeming the disinherited nations back to the high God, Lord of the council. This task could only be accomplished, though, if Yahweh’s people refused to follow the gods of the disinherited nations and kept themselves distinct from the people of those nations under judgment. Only then would Yahweh bless the disinherited nations through his chosen nation—in fulfillment of his original promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 so many years before.



Chapter 13

God's Home Address

Reconstituting the nation of Israel marked Yahweh's movement toward re-establishing his kingdom rule on earth. We're quite used to thinking of the founding of Israel in such terms, but the formation of the nation had more cosmic implications. Not only was a nation reborn, but Yahweh had successfully reclaimed a human family—children who would, as intended at the beginning, image Him and, progressively, transform the earth into a new Eden. You may be wondering how I get this grandiose notion from just the exodus event, especially since the story of Israel just doesn't seem to read that spectacularly. Depends on what grabs your attention.

Eden Revisited

In Chapter 3 we discovered that Eden was the dwelling place and headquarters of the divine council. We were reminded of the description of Eden in Genesis as a lush *garden* with four rivers (Gen. 2:10-14). Eden was also a *mountain* (Ezek. 28:13-14), the administrative “seat of the gods” (Ezek. 28:2) situated in “the midst of the seas” (Ezek. 28:2), a description that reiterated well-watered imagery of the council headquarters. We also learned that the idea that Yahweh lived a garden and on a mountain is completely consistent with the ancient mindset of Israel's neighbors. They also spoke of the gods living on high mountains, which were close to the heavens, and luxuriant gardens, place of paradise. The Old Testament actually uses both kinds of imagery to describe *any* place where Yahweh lived. Yahweh, of course, is also portrayed as omnipresent,⁹³ but when he met with humankind he did so in specific locales.

This is familiar by now, but I didn't address something about Eden earlier that has relevance here. The time wasn't right. We've come a long way since that chapter. We've covered a lot of ground about the Old Testament having two Yahwehs, one invisible, the other visible and, at times, even embodied in human form. We've talked about the absolute necessity for Yahweh to come to humans in a way that humans can process, and for their own protection—as the second, visible Yahweh. The presence of the second Yahweh has divine council implications, for the second Yahweh is the chief agent of the will of Yahweh and his council. That shouldn't be a surprise, since we've seen repeatedly that where Yahweh is, his council is never far behind.

These ideas are present in the imagery of the Genesis garden scenes. For instance, the account of the creation of humankind in Genesis 2 contains vocabulary that suggests a physicalized Yahweh in the garden. Yahweh “forms” the animals and Adam “out of the ground” (Gen. 2:7, 19), verbiage that feels like it would require the use of hands. Gen 3:8

says that Adam and Eve “heard the sound of the LORD God *walking*...” Walking is another word that speaks of embodiment. The LORD God is walking around in the garden, and Adam and Eve hear his movement. Spirits don’t walk and make sounds with their footsteps or as they brush by foliage.

I bring this issue up because what starts with only a suggestive hint in the cosmic garden becomes progressively more apparent as we move on in the Old Testament. It seems that we have an embodied Yahweh right from the beginning in the garden, but we’re not quite sure. As time goes on, we see the visible Yahweh make himself known in dramatic ways, and even how both the visible and the invisible Yahweh can be simultaneously present. What I want to draw your attention to here is that *the writers of Scripture want readers to see the links to Eden*. The fact is, they are always dropping hints that the presence and kingdom of Yahweh on earth began at Eden, and will end there once again. We’ll see in what follows that while the visible Yahweh *changed* earthly addresses, where he could be found was described in the *same* ways.

Sinai, the Mountain of God

The fact that Eden is referred to as both a garden and a mountain in Ezekiel 28:13-14 is significant, for it provides a conceptual link between Eden and the holy mountain of God that features so prominently in Israel’s early history: Mount Sinai.

We’ve already looked at a number of passages that have Yahweh as residing on Mount Sinai, such as Exodus 3:1-3, the burning bush incident, and Exodus 24:9-11, where Moses and some companions “saw the God of Israel” and enjoyed a meal in his presence. Interestingly, in the Exodus 24 episode we are given some details of Yahweh’s appearance. The text notes the apparently seated visible Yahweh’s feet, under which was “a pavement of sapphire stone (Hebrew, *sappir*), like the very heaven for clearness” (Exod. 24:10). We know we’re dealing with the visible second Yahweh since invisible spirits don’t have feet. This is the Yahweh that can be processed with the human senses. Other throne scenes are consistent with these features.

Yahweh’s presence on Sinai—a place that actually goes by other names in the Old Testament⁹⁴—is elsewhere accompanied by fire, smoke, flashing light, lightning, and loud noises.⁹⁵ Deuteronomy 33:1-2 is representative:

¹ This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death. ² He said: Yahweh came from Sinai, and He shone upon them from Seir. He appeared in radiance from Mount Paran, and approached from Ribebboth-Kodesh, from his right lightning flashed at them.

All of these elements are found in descriptions of Yahweh’s throne or throne room, creating an immediate association between the place of sovereign council and the holy mountain. The most famous is Isaiah 6.

Isaiah 6

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Perhaps the second-most familiar throne room description is the bizarre vision of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 1

²² Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads. ²³ And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. ²⁴ And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. ²⁵ And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings. ²⁶ And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire (Hebrew, sappir); and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. ²⁷ And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. ²⁸ Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.

This famous, odd description of the wheeled throne of Yahweh is echoed in the book of Daniel:

Daniel 7

⁹ As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. ¹⁰ A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

It is important to point out that these passages place Yahweh's throne room on both the earth (Sinai) and in heaven. It is actually fairly common for the Old Testament to

simultaneously have Yahweh on earth and in heaven, and then describe his throne-abode in identical ways. In Psalm 18 we see all the features of the throne imagery, and the passage has Yahweh in the temple and in the heavens:

- ⁶ In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I cried for help.
From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.
- ⁷ Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.
- ⁸ Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.
- ⁹ He bowed the heavens and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.
- ¹⁰ He rode on a cherub and flew;
he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.
- ¹¹ He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him,
thick clouds dark with water.
- ¹² Out of the brightness before him
hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.
- ¹³ The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice,
hailstones and coals of fire.
- ¹⁴ And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.

I won't belabor the point by listing more passages, since it should be clear that Sinai and the throne room of Yahweh are described in identical ways. But what about the divine council? We need to establish the presence of the council in these descriptions for there to be any analogy with Eden.

Sinai, Council Headquarters

You may have noticed the council already in one of the passages you just read. Here it is again, though I've underlined different phrases this time.

Daniel 7

- ⁹ As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire.¹⁰ A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten

thousand stood before him; the court (or, council) sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

This is one of the more explicit divine council texts in the Old Testament. There are *multiple thrones* in this heavenly scene, along with the single throne occupied by the Ancient of Days, the God of Israel.⁹⁶ There is a clear reference to the council—the word translated “court” here refers to a judicial body. It is used again in verse 26 where we read “But the court/council shall sit in judgment . . .” Besides those council members seated, a multitude of others are also present. Yahweh has a packed meeting room!

There is another passage among those we’ve read in this chapter that also has the council at Sinai, though you would never guess that because of the translation. I speak of Deut. 33:1-2. I’ve added verses 3-4 here for the sake of our discussion:

¹ This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death. ² He said: Yahweh came from Sinai, and He shone upon them from Seir. He appeared in radiance from Mount Paran, and approached from Ribboth-Kodesh, from his right lightning flashed at them. ³ Indeed, he loved the people, all his holy ones at your hand. And they followed at your feet; he bears your words, ⁴ the law which Moses commanded us, an inheritance for the assembly of Jacob.

If you’re wondering where the council is in this passage, you wouldn’t be alone. The problem is the translation and, more fundamentally, the Hebrew text used for the translation. Many modern translations are quite similar to the above, which is my own literal translation of the traditional Hebrew (Masoretic) text of the Old Testament. Others are closer to what follows below, Deuteronomy 33:1-4 *according to the Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, whose text differs slightly from the traditional Hebrew text used for most English translations:

¹ This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death. ² He said: The LORD came from Sinai, and He shone to us from Seir; He made haste from Mount Paran with ten thousands of Kadesh, his angels with him. ³ And He had pity on his people, and all the holy ones were under your hands; and they were under you; and he received his words, ⁴ the law which Moses charged us, an inheritance to the assemblies of Jacob.

So what are we looking at? As the traditional Hebrew text goes, the Hebrew phrase in verse 2 underlying “Ribboth-Kodesh” is the same (except for an alternative spelling) as what occurs at Deut. 32:51 (“Meribath Kadesh”). This is why most scholars today consider the phrase to be a geographical place name, and I’d agree, with respect to what they’re reading in the traditional Hebrew text. The Septuagint, however, obviously has something else going on! While it is possible to get “ten thousands of Kadesh” from the Hebrew consonants of the traditional Masoretic text, the very common Hebrew word for angels (*mal’akim*) does not appear in the traditional Masoretic text. The Septuagint translation (*aggeloi* = *angels*) came from a different Hebrew text. According to the

Septuagint, the Old Testament quoted most often by Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament, angels were at Sinai.

The heavenly host of the divine council is also placed specifically at Sinai in Psalm 68:⁹⁷

- 15 O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan;
O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan!
16 Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain,
at the mount that God desired for his abode,
yes, where the LORD will dwell forever?
17 The chariots of God are twice ten thousand,
thousands upon thousands;
the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary.
18 You ascended on high,
leading a host of captives in your train
and receiving gifts among men,
even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.⁹⁸

The conclusion that follows is that, like Eden, the divine council was present at Yahweh's subsequent dwelling place, Mount Sinai.

The Tent Sanctuaries

If I asked you where God “lived” after Sinai you’d probably be able to come up with the answer pretty quickly. Some would likely say the Temple; others might say the Tabernacle. The answer is pretty much on target. There’s actually one other structure to consider before we get to those that will help us process the descriptions of the Tabernacle and the Temple.

Before the Tabernacle was constructed (Exodus 35-40), Moses would meet with Yahweh in a small tent called “the Tent of Meeting.” Though many take the Tent of Meeting and the tabernacle as the same, some passages appear to clearly have the Tent of Meeting in existence before the tabernacle.⁹⁹

The Tent of Meeting is important because it’s a tent. I know that hardly sounds profound, but it’s true. The reason is that elsewhere in the biblical world, the divine beings of the divine council were considered to live in tents—atop their cosmic mountains, of course, which were also gardens! The tent of the god or gods was, as with mountains or lush gardens, the place where heaven and earth intersected and the god or gods did their business of issuing decrees and decisions. Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Ugarit are among the cultures that portrayed their gods in tent shrines. It was a common cultural idea, perhaps akin to how many people think of church—church is a place you’d expect to meet God, or where God hangs around, so to speak.

For Israel, the Tent of Meeting was the place God met with Moses and dispensed oracles for his people (Exod 33:7-11; Num 11:16-30). It was a structure of convenience, though. Once the Tabernacle was built.

The word “tabernacle” (*mishkan*) literally means “dwelling,” an appropriate term since Yahweh would take it as his dwelling place with the Israelites. It was a portable tent structure that served as the location for Israelite worship during the wilderness wanderings under Moses, and then Joshua. It constructed during the Israelites’ stay at the foot of Sinai (Exodus 25-40). *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* elaborates:

[The tabernacle] consisted of a rectangular enclosure, hung with curtains supported on poles, some 145 feet (44 m.) long, 72 feet (22 m.) wide, and 7 feet (2.2 m.) high (Exod. 27:18). Within this, there was another building, also curtained, divided in two by a veil, behind which was the Holy of Holies containing the Ark; before the veil stood the altar of incense, the seven-branched lampstand, and the table for the bread of the Presence (Exod. 25:30). In the courtyard outside this building stood the altar of burnt offering and the laver (Exod. 30:18). When the Israelites moved about during their wilderness wanderings, the whole tabernacle was dismantled by the Levites and re-erected by them wherever the tribes pitched camp (Num. 1:51). While it was stationary, the twelve tribes camped around it in a defined order (Num. 2:1-31), with the Levites in its immediate vicinity (Num. 1:52-53). The furnishings of the tabernacle were made of the finest and costliest materials (Exod. 25:3-7).¹⁰⁰

Moses was told to construct the Tabernacle and its equipment according to the pattern shown to him by Yahweh on the holy mountain (Exod. 26:30; cf. 25:9, 40). The Tabernacle on earth was to be a copy of the heavenly tent in accord with the religious principle of “as in heaven, so on earth.” The heavenly tent prototype was the heavens themselves, as Isaiah 40:22 tells us (“It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in”). This kind of language is also why the earth is referred to as God’s footstool—Yahweh sits above the circle of the earth, in his heavenly tent, on his throne above the waters which are above “the firmament,” and rests his feet on the earth (Isa. 66:1 – “Thus says the LORD: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool”).¹⁰¹ Understanding this imagery is critical for understanding the descriptions of where God chooses to dwell on earth, since those descriptions match. The locale where Yahweh dwells on earth *is* heaven on earth.

To summarize, like the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle was considered the home of Yahweh, the place where his presence resided. It was also the throne room of Yahweh, since the ark of the covenant was there, and Yahweh was thought to reside above the cherubim.¹⁰² The Tabernacle became the focal point for the presence of Yahweh—or, more accurately, it was the dwelling place of the Name. Recall that in Chapter 10 we looked at passages like Deuteronomy 12, where the tabernacle, the place of sacrifice, was the place Yahweh “caused his Name to dwell” (Deut. 12:10). We see the same idea in Jeremiah 7:12, after the tabernacle was stationed at Shiloh (see below) – “Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell ...” Already there are divine council implications. We know two things about the Name from earlier chapters: (1) the Name is another term for Yahweh—Yahweh is at times called the Name, and vice versa;

(2) the Name was within the Angel (Exod. 23:20-23), who therefore was the physically embodied second Yahweh.

The Tabernacle traveled with Israel during the entire journey to the Promised Land. Once Israel penetrated the Land, the ark of the covenant (and hence the Tabernacle structure) was situated at Bethel (Josh. 20:27), a name that means “house of God.” This then became the place where one inquired of God. Bethel is a place that has come up many times in our discussion. You know Bethel by now. It was the place where Jacob had his encounter with Yahweh and the angels of his council atop the “ladder” (i.e., a ziggurat; Gen. 28:10-22). It was the place where the “angels of God” appeared to him again when fleeing from Esau, his brother (Gen. 32:1-5). It was the place Jacob built an altar and a pillar to commemorate the appearances of Yahweh and the *elohim* to him (Gen 35:1-7). It was the place Deborah the prophetess who sat under the terebinth tree lived (Judges 4:5).

Sometime later the Tabernacle moved from Bethel to Shiloh. Once that moved occurred, it was said that the “house of God” was Shiloh (Judges 18:31; 1 Sam 1:24; Jer. 7:12)). The Old Testament indicates that Shiloh naturally became the place of sacrifice (Judges 21:19; 1 Sam 1:3). At Shiloh we see the boy Samuel encounter the physicalized Yahweh, the Word (1 Sam 3). It remained there even after Eli the priest foolishly sent the ark of the covenant out to battle and it fell into the hands of the Philistines. The ark traveled to several locations after Yahweh judged the Philistines, but the priests and the ephod, which held the means of inquiring of God, the Urim and the Thummim, remained at Shiloh (1 Sam. 14:3).

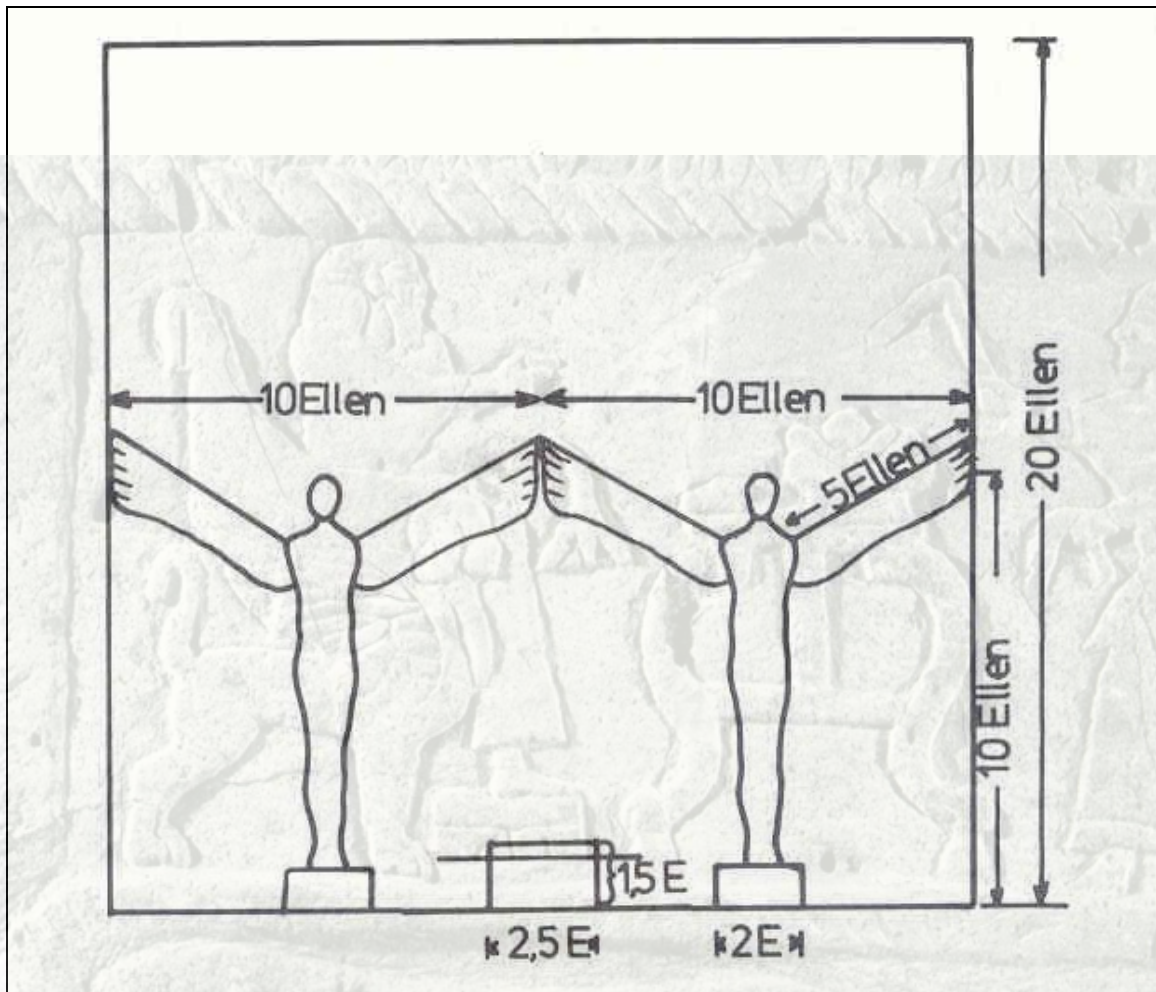
Eventually the ark was brought to Jerusalem. At first, David placed it in a temporary tent he had made for it (2 Sam. 6:17; 2 Chron. 1:3-4), under the assumption that he was going to build a temple for it. He removed it during the time of civil unrest caused by his son, Absalom (2 Sam 15:24-25). In the meantime, the place of sacrifice had become Gibeon (1 Kings 3:4) where, we are told, an ancient “Tent of Meeting” of Moses had been moved (2 Chron. 1:3). In Solomon’s day, Gibeon was the high place of worship. The “Tent of Meeting” at Gibeon was actually the Mosaic Tabernacle, since sacrifices were offered there (something that was not true of *the* Tent of Meeting in Moses’ day). This separation of the ark at Jerusalem and the Tabernacle tent at Gibeon was the situation during the time of Solomon as well, prior to Solomon’s construction of the Temple.

The important point in all of this is that, not only was the abode and throne room of Yahweh considered to be the lush garden of Eden and a holy mountain, they were also considered to be found within a tent structure. All of these images—tent, mountain, garden—come together in the Temple, the fixed place where Yahweh was considered to dwell and order the earth and the heavens with his council. Let’s take them in that order.

The Tent in the Temple

We sort of assume that once the Temple was built and the ark of the covenant was placed inside it that the Tabernacle tent structure was discarded or perhaps destroyed. This isn’t the case. In reality, *the Tabernacle tent was moved into the Temple with the ark*. Recall

that within the tabernacle was another building, completely covered with curtains, called the Holy Place. This room was divided in two by a veil, behind which was the Holy of Holies, the room that contained the Ark (Exod. 26). The inside of the temple also had this same type of inner room arrangement. There was one major difference, though, between the inner sanctum of the temple and that of the tabernacle. The inner area of the temple had two giant cherubim in it, standing side-by-side, the tips of their wings stretching across to touch each other, like so:



The effect of this was that the cherubim wings formed the seat of a throne for Yahweh, and the ark was his footstool. Amazingly, if one measures the width and height dimensions between the cherubim, one discovers they are precisely the same as the dimensions of the tabernacle, which means the tabernacle structure could be erected under and between the cherubim.¹⁰³ In the temple, the imagery of Yahweh on his throne and “living” in the ancient tent were both preserved.

We know the tabernacle tent structure was moved inside the temple from several other considerations. There are passages like 1 Kings 8:4, which tell us that it wasn’t only the ark that was brought to the finished temple, but also the Tabernacle and its accoutrements. Well after the days of Solomon, the Chronicler reports that when King

Joash ordered repairs for the Temple, he angrily asked, “Why have you not required the Levites to bring in from Judah and Jerusalem the tax levied by Moses, the servant of the LORD, and the congregation of Israel for the tent of testimony?” When Hezekiah wanted the temple repaired and true worship reinstituted at the temple his words also suggest the tabernacle tent structure was in the temple:

³ In the first year of his reign, in the first month, [Hezekiah] opened the doors of the house of the LORD and repaired them. ⁴ He brought in the priests and the Levites and assembled them in the square on the east ⁵ [A]nd said to them, “Hear me, Levites! Now consecrate yourselves, and consecrate the house of the LORD, the God of your fathers, and carry out the filth from the Holy Place. ⁶ For our fathers have been unfaithful and have done what was evil in the sight of the LORD our God. They have forsaken him and have turned away their faces from the tabernacle (*mishkan*) of the LORD and turned their backs. ⁷ They also shut the doors of the vestibule and put out the lamps and have not burned incense or offered burnt offerings in the Holy Place to the God of Israel (2 Chronicles 29:3-7).

Other passages are more direct. Psalm 26:8 (of David) says, “O Yahweh, I love the habitation of your house; and the place of the tabernacle (*mishkan*) of your glory.” Psalm 61:5 sounds remarkably like the overhead cherubim wing covering in its parallel wording:

“Let me dwell in your tent forever!
Let me seek refuge under the covering of your wings!”

Finally, Josephus reports that the tabernacle tent was brought to the temple (*Ant* 8.101; see also 106), and he notes that the outspread wings of the cherubs had the effect of looking like a tent (8.103).

The point here is to solidify the Old Testament’s “temple as tabernacle” thinking. Now we need to do the same for its “temple as mountain” and “temple as garden” mindset.

The Temple as Cosmic Mountain and Cosmic Garden

The Temple of Yahweh in Israel was naturally associated with a cosmic mountain dwelling like Sinai because it was situated in Jerusalem on Mount Zion, the new Sinai. Psalm 48:1-2 makes this quite clear:

¹ Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God!
His holy mountain, ² beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the heights of the north,
the city of the great King.

Zechariah 8:3 echoes the same notion: “Thus says the LORD: I have returned to Zion and will dwell [literally, “will tabernacle”; *shakan*] in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts, the holy mountain.”

As anyone who has been to Israel knows, while Mount Zion is a mountain of sorts, it isn’t very high. And it is certainly not the highest peak in the region. The language is curious. And what is meant by “the heights of the north”?

This description would be a familiar one to Israel’s pagan neighbors, for it is taken out of their literature. The “heights of the north”—literally, “the recesses of Zaphon”—is the place where Baal lived and, supposedly, ran the cosmos at the behest of the high god El. The psalmist is stealing glory from Baal as it were and restoring it to the One to whom it rightfully belongs—Yahweh. It’s a theological and literary slap in the face. The Old Testament writers do this with some frequency, but that isn’t something we’d notice unless we were working in Hebrew and were well read in the literature of Israel’s neighbors.

This explains why the description sounds odd in terms of Jerusalem’s actual geography—it’s designed to make a theological point, not a geographical one. Zion is the center of the cosmos, and Yahweh and his council are its King and administrators, not Baal. This is why Isaiah and Micah used phrases like “the mountain of the house of Yahweh” (Isa. 2:2; Micah 4:1). Zion / Jerusalem is the mountain of the LORD *of hosts*. The Jerusalem temple is where the high God lives, and it is situated on the cosmic mountain, the mountain of Yahweh and his council.

The temple is also the Edenic garden, full of lush vegetation and animals. The description of the temple’s construction in 1 Kings 6-7 is explicit in this regard.

“The cedar within the house was carved in the form of gourds and open flowers.” (6:18)

“Around all the walls of the house he carved engraved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms.” (6:29)

“He covered the two doors of olivewood with carvings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers. He overlaid them with gold and spread gold on the cherubim and on the palm trees.” (6:32)

“[A]nd two doors of cypress wood. The two leaves of the one door were folding, and the two leaves of the other door were folding. On them he carved cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, and he overlaid them with gold evenly applied on the carved work.” (6:34-35)

¹⁸ Likewise he made pomegranates in two rows around the one latticework to cover the capital that was on the top of the pillar, and he did the same with the

other capital. ¹⁹ Now the capitals that were on the tops of the pillars in the vestibule were of lily-work, four cubits. ²⁰ The capitals were on the two pillars and also above the rounded projection which was beside the latticework. There were two hundred pomegranates in two rows all around, and so with the other capital. ²¹ He set up the pillars at the vestibule of the temple. He set up the pillar on the south and called its name Jachin, and he set up the pillar on the north and called its name Boaz. ²² And on the tops of the pillars was lily-work. Thus the work of the pillars was finished. ²³ Then he made the sea of cast metal. It was round, ten cubits from brim to brim, and five cubits high, and a line of thirty cubits measured its circumference. ²⁴ Under its brim were gourds, for ten cubits, compassing the sea all around. The gourds were in two rows, cast with it when it was cast. ²⁵ It stood on twelve oxen, three facing north, three facing west, three facing south, and three facing east. The sea was set on them, and all their rear parts were inward. ²⁶ Its thickness was a handbreadth, and its brim was made like the brim of a cup, like the flower of a lily. It held two thousand baths. ²⁷ He also made the ten stands of bronze. Each stand was four cubits long, four cubits wide, and three cubits high. ²⁸ This was the construction of the stands: they had panels, and the panels were set in the frames, ²⁹ and on the panels that were set in the frames were lions, oxen, and cherubim. On the frames, both above and below the lions and oxen, there were wreaths of beveled work . . . ³⁵ And on the top of the stand there was a round band half a cubit high; and on the top of the stand its stays and its panels were of one piece with it. ³⁶ And on the surfaces of its stays and on its panels, he carved cherubim, lions, and palm trees, according to the space of each, with wreaths all around . . . So Hiram finished all the work that he did for King Solomon on the house of the LORD: ⁴¹ the two pillars, the two bowls of the capitals that were on the tops of the pillars, and the two latticeworks to cover the two bowls of the capitals that were on the tops of the pillars; ⁴² and the four hundred pomegranates for the two latticeworks, two rows of pomegranates for each latticework, to cover the two bowls of the capitals that were on the pillars.” (7:18-42)

In Ezekiel’s vision of the new temple (Ezekiel 40-48), he saw a temple built on a high mountain (40:2), whose courts were decorated with palm trees (40:31-34). The interior was decorated with more palm trees and cherubim (41:17ff.). Ezekiel’s temple-garden was well-watered, like Eden, since a river flowed from it that supernaturally gave life to everything else (47:1-12).

In Israel’s theology, Eden, the tabernacle, Sinai, and the temple were equally the abode of Yahweh and his council. The Israelites who had the tabernacle and the temple were constantly reminded of the fact that they had the God of the cosmic mountain and the cosmic garden living in their midst, and if they obeyed him, Zion would become the kingdom domain of Yahweh, which would serve as the place to which he would re-gather the disinherited nations cast aside at Babel to Himself. Micah puts it rather well:

¹ It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD

shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and it shall be lifted up above the hills;
and peoples shall flow to it,
2 and many nations shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

Eden-Tabernacle-Temple and the Babel Incident

You may recall from Chapter 8 that one of the most important events of the Old Testament was the rebellion at the Tower of Babel. This event is central to the idea that Yahweh's rule through his divine council is of fundamental importance for understanding the Bible's cosmic story. What we've learned in this chapter helps us process what was going on in that event—what made it important enough for Yahweh to intervene and disinherit the nations.

Since gods were thought to live in temples, across the ancient world temples were viewed as places where heaven and earth occupied mutual space. The temple was the point of intersection between the heavenly realm and the terrestrial realm, just like the cosmic mountains of the gods. This in turn is why many temples were built in the form of mountains and at locations where it was believed the first mound of earth appeared after creation (e.g., ziggurats or pyramids). There was a conceptual-visual connection between temples and the mountains where the gods lived.

We know that the Babel story is set in Babylon, since Babylon is the “land of Shinar” (Gen 10:2).¹⁰⁴ The Shinar-Babylon connection is more explicit in Daniel 1:2, where Shinar is the land of Nebuchadnezzar, the place where he took the vessels of the Jewish temple after destroying Jerusalem. Babylon is situated in Mesopotamia, a region known for its ziggurat temples, such as the partially destroyed one below from Ur (Iraq)



It is for this reason that all scholars agree that the Tower of Babel in Shinar of the Old Testament was a ziggurat, a physical “stairway to the heavens” in the ancient mind. For our purposes, the building project of Babel in Genesis 10 was an effort to build, in physical form, a cosmic mountain. It was an effort, unsanctioned by Yahweh, *to rebuild Eden*—to construct a place where Yahweh and the divine council would live and meet.

You might wonder why this was a bad idea to Yahweh, especially since it was his original intention to have human beings with him in his divine council on earth along with his heavenly family members. The effort was offensive for several reasons. First, it is up to Yahweh—not human beings—to decide where he will meet with humanity and where his abode will be. Humans do not control Yahweh or his will. Yahweh had not commanded the tower to be built. Second, the last time human beings tampered with the earthly council arrangement in Eden was Genesis 3, the Fall. Rather than let Yahweh decide how the divine council on earth arrangement worked, particularly at what point human beings would have access to divine knowledge and be “as elohim,” Adam and Eve were seduced into taking matters into their own hands. Babel involved the same sort of hubris. Third, the motivation wasn’t entirely the illegitimate idea of putting Yahweh on notice as to where he and his council would live. The scheme also involved gaining fame for having built the place where God lived. In short, the incident at Babel showed Yahweh his earthly children were still rebellious and wanted access to him and his council on their own terms, not his. Yahweh disinherited the nations called Abraham to start a new family.

The children of Abraham, the nation of Israel, had direct access to Yahweh through both the visible Yahweh and Yahweh’s human servant, Moses. Unlike Babel, Yahweh chose the time and place to meet with humanity and to allow humanity glimpses of his council. At first this was Sinai, but the final intended location was Zion. But before Yahweh had his people leave Sinai there was one more thing for him and his council to do. Yahweh’s new family was to have a unique relationship with him. They had to be taught how to relate to him, how to worship him, and how to avoid mingling with the people of the disinherited nations who had their own corrupt *elohim* masters. They had to know that where they lived Yahweh was, and it was holy ground. The outer realm, divided among

the disinherited nations, was the realm of darkness, forsaken by Yahweh and thus the domain of other gods and rebellion against Yahweh. It was time to lay down the Law.

⁹³ For example, see Jer. 23:23-24; Psa. 139:7-10.

⁹⁴ Mount Sinai is also called Mount Horeb in the Old Testament. For example, see Exod. 3:1-3; Deut. 4:15; 5:2; 1 Kings 8:9.

⁹⁵ For example, see Exo. 19:16, 18; 20:18; Deut. 5:4-5, 22-26.

⁹⁶ Some Jewish interpreters say the plural “thrones” refers to only two thrones—that of the God of Israel and the other for King David, whom they identify with the Son of Man in this passage. There are several problems with that view, namely the passages clear parallels to divine council scenes from the Ugaritic Baal Cycle (see Chapter 20) and the fact that the Son of Man neither takes a seat, nor is one offered to him when he approaches the Ancient of Days. It also cannot be argued that the plural seats are for human Jewish elders (see Chapter 1 for how that idea is used against a heavenly council of *elohim*), since the court/council in Daniel 7 is clearly in heaven and is making a decision *for* the human holy people at the time when the kingdom of the son of Man is established; cf. Dan 7:22).

⁹⁷ The references to Bashan are striking, especially when read against the backdrop of the demonic geography outlined in Chapter 14. **NOTE:** I’m not sure at this point whether I’ll return to Bashan after chapter 14 to explain Psalm 68, or whether I’ll add something to Ch. 14 that does that.

⁹⁸ Readers may recognize that this is the passage quoted in the New Testament by Paul (Eph. 4:8). See Chapter 23 for comments on this quotation.

⁹⁹ The issue is actually pretty confusing. On one hand, we have passages like Exod. 33:7-11 which have Moses using the Tent of Meeting before the construction of the Tabernacle. This passage and a general survey of the material indicate several facts that distinguish the Tent of Meeting from the Tabernacle: (1) one man could pitch, unlike the much larger Tabernacle, which took scores of workers to tear down, erect, and transport; (2) the Tent of Meeting was outside the camp, unlike the tabernacle, which was in the middle of the camp; (3) the Tent of Meeting was guarded and maintained by a single person; (4) There is no indication that the Tent of Meeting was a place of sacrifice, or that the ark of the covenant was kept in it.

¹⁰⁰ Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper's Bible dictionary*. Includes index. (1st ed.) (1013). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

¹⁰¹ For example, see Job 9:8; Ps. 104:2.

¹⁰² This is controversial. Many scholars do not think the ark is rightly understood as a throne since it is elsewhere called God’s footstool. However, while “footstool” is entirely appropriate when speaking of the Temple cherubim and ark (see the discussion), there were no such giant cherubim in the Tabernacle, which would suggest the ark was a throne. English translations often have “mercy seat” for the lid of the ark, on which were the cherubim, but the Hebrew term actually means “covering” or “place of covering” / “place of atonement.”

¹⁰³ See R. E. Friedman, “Tabernacle,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6:292-300); idem, “The Tabernacle in the Temple,” BA 43 (1980): 241-248. The graphic is from Martin Metzger, *Königsthron und Gottesthron: Thronformen und Throndarstellungen in Ägypten und im Vorderen Orient im dritten und zweiten Jahrtausend vor Christus und deren Bedeutung für das Verständnis von Aussagen über den Thron im Alten Testament* (Butzon and Becherer Kevelaer, 1985).

¹⁰⁴ David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 5:1220.

Chapter 14

God's Family, God's Rules

I'll admit, it's a little hard to get excited about the law of God. We're not as close to it as King David was, when he wrote "the law of the Yahweh is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of Yahweh is sure, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7), or Paul, who exclaimed that he delighted in the law of God in his heart (Romans 7:22). This distance notwithstanding, anyone who has read much of the Bible knows the Law is a very important part of Israel's identity. As such, it's a subject that can't be overlooked.

All of Israelite culture was shaped by the Law: marriage and family relationships, social welfare, work and charity, sacrifice and ritual, personal and community holiness, foreign relations, and worship are some of the broad areas defined by the Law. But more fundamentally, the Law is about teaching basic ideas to Yahweh's earthly family about living in his presence, which by definition involves the divine council. The Law reinforces the separation of the divine and earthly spheres while laying out the rules for their co-existence in the process of working back to Yahweh's Edenic goal of divine-human rule on earth. We just aren't used to thinking about the law in association with God and his heavenly host and the reconstitution of council rule on earth.

The Cosmic Mountain: The Birthplace of the Law

In the last chapter we spent a good deal of time discovering that Eden, Sinai, the Tabernacle, the Temple, and Zion were all described in the same imagery. This is the case since they were all the home of Yahweh and, therefore, the place where the divine council met. We specifically looked at passages like Deut. 33:1-4 to establish the presence of the divine council at Sinai. We need to consider that passage again in this chapter, because Deut. 33:1-4 helps us understand an idea that shows up in the New Testament which might sound a bit strange if you've never come across it before: the Law was delivered by angels, members of the divine council.

This idea comes to us in three New Testament passages, two of which are below:

Acts 7:52-53

⁵² Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

Hebrews 2:1-2a

¹ Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ² For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

I remember the first time I came across these verses. I had read a lot of the Old Testament before and had never seen this idea, so I naturally wondered where in the world the New Testament writers were getting it. Turns out if you stick with translations that follow the traditional Masoretic Hebrew text for the Old Testament, there are places where angels are at Sinai, but there's no place where the law is mentioned in conjunction with angelic appearances at Sinai. It seems completely contrived—until you take a look at the Septuagint, the Bible of the early church.

In the last chapter, we saw that the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 33:1-4 has angels at Sinai whereas the traditional Hebrew text does not. That isn't all the Septuagint passage does, though. Take a look at the passage in both versions:

Traditional Masoretic Hebrew Text	Septuagint
¹ This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death.	¹ This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death.
² He said: Yahweh came from Sinai, and He shone upon them from Seir. He appeared in radiance from Mount Paran, and <u>approached from Ribebboth-Kodesh, from his right lightning flashed at them.</u>	² He said: The LORD came from Sinai, and He shone to us from Seir; He made haste from Mount Paran <u>with ten thousands of Kadesh, his angels with him.</u>
³ Indeed, <u>he loved the people, all his holy ones at your hand.</u> And they followed at your feet; he bears your words,	³ And <u>He had pity on his people, and all the holy ones were under your hands; and they were under you;</u> and he received <u>his words,</u>
4 the law which Moses commanded us, an inheritance for the assembly of Jacob.	4 <u>the law which Moses charged us, an inheritance to the assemblies of Jacob.</u>

The fundamental difference, noted in the last chapters, is that the Septuagint version has angels in it (v. 2) and the traditional text doesn't. In verse 3 the traditional Masoretic Text seems to equate “the people” with “all his holy ones.” This connection creates the impression that Yahweh's people, his holy people, are under his authority (“under your hand”). They follow at the LORD's feet and receive the Law. Note that the singular pronoun “he” in “he bears your words” refers to Israel collectively (i.e., “ISRAEL bears your words”). Israel is often referred to with singular nouns in the Bible (“my son,”

Exod. 4:21-23; “my servant,” Isa. 44:1). The Septuagint, however, gives the reader the impression that “his people” and “all the holy ones” are *different groups*. In the Septuagint, God pities his people, and his holy ones—the angels referred to in the previous verse—are under his authority. This separation of two groups allows the reader to see a reference to angels and the law in the same passage.

However, while we can see the New Testament authors saw an implied giving of the Law through the divine council, Deut. 33:1-4 doesn’t explicitly say the law came to Israel by means of angels. We still have no explicit Old Testament text that has the law being given by an angelic intermediary ... or do we? Galatians 3:19 adds a tantalizing detail that, in my mind, gives us more clarity on the matter (the italics are mine):

Galatians 3:19

¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.

Without going into too much detail, Galatians 3:19 informs us that there was an intermediary *between* God and the angels who was somehow responsible for giving the law. Most scholars assume this is a reference to Moses. Other scholars have noted that this is problematic in light of the very next verse (“Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one”), but they then assume that the mediator referred to in verse 9 is a mediator to angels. No wonder this has been described as one of the most confusing texts in the New Testament!¹⁰⁵

Let me suggest another solution—one that offers a mediator for God, for the angels, and doesn’t violate God’s “oneness.” We’ve devoted a lot of time and space thus far to describing Yahweh’s main means of being present with humans in a way that both protected them and helped them process Him as a person: the Angel. I would suggest that this Angel, Yahweh embodied and thus made visible as a man, is the mediator to whom Galatians 3:19 alludes.

How can I say this? Recalling that the embodied Yahweh of the Old Testament is consistently identified as the Angel, and that the Angel is at times found in the fire but referred to as Yahweh, Deuteronomy 9:9-10 takes on new significance.¹⁰⁶ Moses says:

⁹ When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water. ¹⁰ And the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words that the LORD had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.

This language is by now very familiar—the language of human physicality (“finger”) applied to Yahweh. This is the stock description of the second Yahweh, *the Angel*. It

shouldn't be a surprise that the New Testament speaks of angelic mediation for the Law—it was written by the Angel who is God in the presence of council angels and then dispensed to Israel through Moses.

Living as Imagers and Council Members

I said at the start of the chapter that the Law simultaneously reinforces the separation of the divine and earthly spheres while laying out the rules for kingdom life on earth. That's a fancy way of saying that the purpose of the Law was to tell the ancient Israelites who had just emerged from slavery in Egypt, and who were the newly reconstituted family of God on earth, how to properly image God and live as though they were in his council—in the presence of God's holiness. These are big ideas, and the Law is a vast subject to cover. One chapter obviously can't do it justice, but I think I can summarize and illustrate these ideas in the space we do have.

Back in Eden, it was God's intention that all humanity, beginning with Adam and Eve, would image him and steward creation. That is still the goal, and all humans are still to be viewed as imagers. Imaging and humanity are inseparably linked. After the Fall, however, the task had to be accomplished in non-Edenic conditions. The task got harder because of the curses incurred at the Fall. As human rebellion multiplied, culminating with the disinheriting of the nations at Babel, humanity forsook the mission of imaging Yahweh and focused on other gods. Yahweh had to raise up a new people, and now these people needed to be re-oriented as to how Yahweh wanted to use them to re-establish his kingdom on earth. The Law was a guide for that purpose.

Saying that the Law lays out rules for kingdom life doesn't mean that I think we'll be living under such laws when Eden is restored on earth, or that we should reinstitute the Mosaic Law today. Indeed, some of the Law reflects a patriarchal society. The Mosaic Law is as much a part of the ancient human cultural context of Moses' day as it is divinely inspired. God gave this revelation to people living at a certain time in a certain place—he didn't change them into some other kind of human or go to a different culture. Yahweh used what he had at his disposal. We can suppose God could have injected entirely new ideas into his revelation at all points, so that the Law would look more modern and more refined, but the reality is that he didn't. Fixing the culture wasn't the point. Some of the Old Testament laws may seem unfair or downright goofy to us, but their purpose was to make a larger point: Yahweh is our father, we are his family, he wants us to live in his presence and administer an unfallen creation with him and his heavenly host by merging heaven and earth. What could be better than that?

The Law was designed to both instill a desire for this goal and to make clear that it could not be achieved through human effort. That was one of the lessons at Babel. Humans are not going to bring Eden back through their own efforts or devices. You don't become united to Yahweh and his *elohim* family-council on your own terms. That's God's task on his timetable. The Law therefore reinforces certain ideas in the mind of the Israelite—and we ought to have the same ideas firmly entrenched in our mind as well.

Some General Lessons from The Law

Fundamentally, the Law teaches us that there is a divine realm and a human realm. The divine realm is set apart (“holy”) from the human realm (“profane” – which merely means “common”). It teaches us that God has put certain boundaries between those realms that ought not be violated. It is forbidden, for example, to communicate with the dead—not because it can’t happen, but because it can, and humans cannot process and deal with the results. The realm of the dead, what we think of as the “spiritual world,” is not the human realm, so humans cannot control it and be certain its residents are what they seem to be, or are trustworthy. We also learn from the Law that the cosmos has God-given order, and that order must be maintained and not violated. Life on earth is to reflect this concept of orderliness vs. chaos. This is at the heart of why animals are divided into groups acceptable (“clean”) and unacceptable (“unclean”) for food. The food laws were, in effect, a living illustration of “realm separation” to teach the bigger idea.

The Law does this by means of rules about sacred space (areas), clothing, food, sexual relationships, community conduct, etc. Since God knows human nature best—or, perhaps we should say how unfallen human nature would most enjoy life—following God’s laws results in blessing and prosperity.

In regard to the inter-relationship of the Law to the divine council to the Israelites as the special focus of Yahweh’s desire to restore his Edenic divine-human rule on earth, some of the wordplay in the Hebrew Old Testament is interesting—and in my view, not coincidental. For example, the Hebrew word for “council” (as in the divine council in Psalm 82) is *adat*. Note that the two consonants are “d” and “t” respectively. This word is used throughout the Old Testament and is frequently translated “congregation.” It is used of the nation of Israel roughly 100 times in the Pentateuch—the *adat Israel*. The Law dispensed in the presence of the divine *adat* at Sinai is often called the *edut* – same consonants but different vowels, since both words come from the same basic root in Hebrew.¹⁰⁷ The tablets of the Law handed to Moses by the visible Yahweh on Sinai were at first kept in the Tent of Meeting and then the Tabernacle, inside the ark of the covenant. As such, all of these items came to be referred to as the *edut*.¹⁰⁸ The “mercy seat” above the ark of the covenant—the place where Yahweh met with Moses—was therefore said to be “above the *edut*.”¹⁰⁹ All of these items and the nation itself were verbally (and therefore mentally) interconnected with Yahweh and the divine council on Sinai. The imagery is supplemented by realizing that Israel was corporately referred to as the “son” or “sons” of God. The Law was truly a gift from heaven for Yahweh’s earthly council sons and daughters. It was the handbook for divine kingdom thinking and living.

We can go deeper into the terminology by also noting that Israel was intended by Yahweh to be a “kingdom of priests” who are a “holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). The Hebrew phrase “kingdom of priests” can actually convey several ideas:

- “kingdom of people set apart to be priests” – This option implies that the Israelites were to function as intercessors to the outer, disinherited nations—to bring them to Yahweh and Yahweh to them.

- “kings who are priests” (“priest-kings”) – This option has each Israelite being a king and a priest. Note that the Messiah, who was also called the son of God, served in both roles.
- “royal priests” – This alternative is like the preceding, except it denotes “member of the royal family” in general, as opposed to specifically being a king.

Personally, I think the ambiguity in meaning is deliberate and that the phrase was intended to convey all these ideas. The Israelites were in the family of the King and hence royal. As was the case for all humanity in Eden, they were intended to be kings, fellow rulers of Yahweh’s dominion, imaging him as though he were physically present. As priests, the Israelites were “a display-people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people.”¹¹⁰ Yahweh was working back to Eden and toward a day when all the nations would be reclaimed as his own. But this would all start with Israel—if they would choose it by walking in the Law and believing in Yahweh’s promises to them.

Holiness and Sacred Space

The idea of the separateness of the divine realm was reinforced by the laws that allowed or disallowed proximity to Yahweh. These permissions or prohibitions extended to objects associated with Yahweh (e.g., the ark of the covenant or vessels inside the Tabernacle or Temple), since sanctity (“holiness”) could be transmitted to objects. Holiness of course also concerned morality, but it meant much more. Additionally, there were gradations of holiness. The closer one got to Yahweh, the more holy the ground or the object in his proximity.

For example, the sacred space occupied by the Tabernacle and Temple got progressively more holy from the entrance to the innermost room. The terms that describe this progression are evidence of this progression. From the entrance to the Temple, there is the Court, the Holy Place, and the “Most Holy Place” (“Holy of Holies”). There were essentially zones of holiness. The objects in each zone were progressively more holy, culminating with the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place. The priests in various zones were distinguished in the Mosaic Law by their clothing. The holier the zone, the fewer priests that were dressed in certain ways, ending with the high priest, who wore the ephod, the breastplate, and the headdress inscribed with “holy to Yahweh.” The holier the zone and priest, the more costly the animal sacrificed to sanctify them when they entered into the presence of Yahweh for various rituals. Priest and non-priests could be disqualified by from any zone wherein they were permitted by a variety of things that rendered them “unclean”: sexual activity, bodily emissions, contact with a dead body, childbirth, etc. All of this reinforced the rarified air of the presence of Yahweh—the presence that, at one time, all humans shared. These things weren’t evil, but they did disqualify one from sacred space. Some of the items in this particular list are explainable by the “order” principle. There was the orderly “proper” constitution of the human body, for example. Normally, the body would not be losing blood or other fluids. The dead did not belong to the normal terrestrial realm, and so contact with that realm had to be

addressed; the unclean person had to be made clean or whole (“normalized”) before entering sacred space. Sexual activity was the something confined to the terrestrial realm; it did not cross over into the non-terrestrial presence of Yahweh. The body served as an analogy for the orderliness of all things as designed by Yahweh. The issue wasn’t morality; it was reinforcement of “realm distinction” and “cosmic order.” Yahweh was not of this earth, and care needed to be taken to be close to his presence.

Since Israel, by means of the Tabernacle and then the Temple, was where Yahweh had chosen to abide, the Promised Land it occupied in effect became holy ground. This harkens back to our earlier discussion of the disinheriting of the nations and the election of Abraham. From the moment of the division of the nations among the sons of God and the call of Abraham and subsequent creation of “Yahweh’s inheritance,” Israel was sacred space and everything outside of it was not. Israel was holy; everywhere else was profane. Israel was Yahweh’s holy portion; the nations were the domain of the corrupted sons of God and therefore unclean. Israel was to be separate from the nations and their people. Intermarriage with the people of the disinherited nations was a particular concern. The law provided strict rules for Gentile conversion into Israel and foreign women brought into the nation through war or other circumstances.

What this means is that the principle of the two realms and the principle of order vs. chaos was analogized on earth. The boundary between Israel and the nations had to be maintained, and this reinforced the divine / holy—terrestrial / profane dichotomy.

Sacrifice and Ritual

It goes without saying that there were regular violations of the principles of holiness laid down in the Law. The Law itself made provision for restoring God’s order and holiness by means of sacrifice and ritual.

Sacrifice is quite foreign to us, particularly if we come from the modern Western world. Many of us would even find it reprehensible since we’re talking about blood sacrifice. Blood was viewed as the most vital life substance (“the life of the flesh is in the blood”; Lev. 17:11). In Israelite sacrifices, blood could not be consumed, but had to be poured out on the ground. Hebrew wordplay again gives us a glimpse into the teaching lesson conveyed in this simple practice.¹¹¹ The life force of the red (*adam*) blood (*dam*) returned to the earth (*adamah*) on behalf of humanity’s (*adam*) sin or cleanness. We often forget that Genesis 1:24 and 2:7 tell us that both land animals and humans came from the earth. The life force of the blood would return and be absorbed from whence it came. Blood was a symbol of the earthly realm of the cosmos. When a violation of the heavenly realm occurred—whether a violation of morality (sin / moral impurity) or a violation of holiness (uncleanness / spiritual impurity), something on the terrestrial plane had to die to restore balance. The point again was that the two realms, while so utterly distinct, were inseparably connected. Depending on the violation, the lesson to be learned wasn’t that the violator or the sacrifice “deserved” to die. Rather, it was to reinforce the idea that God had connected heaven and earth from the very beginning. What happens in sacred

space, whether order is kept or chaos breaks through, affects the equilibrium of the other realm. Balance must be restored and chaos subdued.

Violations of “realm distinction” could occur within Israel (e.g., violations of the sacred space of the Tabernacle or Temple) and outside Israel (e.g., violating prohibitions associated with Gentile people and nations). Because human failure is so frequent and so noticeable, it would have been quite apparent to the Israelite that earth-bound humans were incapable of living in perfect order and harmony with God. They were in constant danger of disrupting order. In fact, one annual ritual, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), was designed to make sure that the slate could be totally wiped clean and a new beginning could be had.

Yahweh and Azazel

In point of fact, the Day of Atonement ritual actually provides a fascinating convergence of all the ideas we’ve discussed to this point in the chapter: holiness, realm distinction, restoration, sacred and profane space, and Yahweh and his family versus the nations and their *elohim*.

If you’ve at least flipped through Leviticus on your way to another book of the Bible you may know that the Day of Atonement ritual is described in Leviticus 16. Part of that description goes like this:

⁷ Then [Aaron] shall take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁸ And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel. ⁹ And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD and use it as a sin offering, ¹⁰ but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel. (Lev. 16:7-10; ESV)

Why is one of the goats “for Azazel”? Who or what is “Azazel”? Here’s where things get a little strange, unless you are acquainted with the cosmic geographical ideas we’ve been talking about.

The word “Azazel” in the Hebrew text can be translated “the goat that goes away.” This is the justification for the common “scapegoat” translation (NIV, NASB, KJV). The scapegoat, so the translator has it, symbolically carries the sins of the people away from the camp of Israel into the wilderness. Seems simple enough.

However, “Azazel” could also be a proper name. In Lev. 16:8 one goat is “*for Yahweh*” while the other goat is “*for Azazel*.” Since Yahweh is a proper name and the goats are described in the same way, Hebrew parallelism suggests Azazel is also a proper name, which is why more recent translations, sensitive to the literary character of the Hebrew text, read “Azazel” and not “scapegoat” (ESV, NRSV, NJPS). So what’s the big deal?

The point of importance is that Azazel is the name of a demon in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient Jewish books. In fact, one scroll (4Q 180, 1:8) Azazel is the leader of the angels that sinned in Genesis 6:1-4. The same description appears in the book of *I Enoch* (8:1; 9:6; 10:4-8; 13:1; 54:5-6; 55:4; 69:2). Recall that in Intertestamental Judaism, the offending sons of God from Genesis 6 were believed to have been imprisoned in a Pit or Abyss in the Netherworld. As we saw in Chapter 6, the apostle Peter uses the Greek term Tartarus for this place (2 Peter 2:4). Tartarus is translated “Hell” in some English versions, but the term actually refers to the lowest place in the Netherworld, which was conceived as being under the earth humans walk upon. In Greek thought, Tartarus was the prison for the divine giants (Titans) defeated by the Olympian gods. The blood of these Titans that fell to earth in these battles created a new race of savage men that the gods destroyed in a flood. In Jewish theology, Azazel’s realm was somewhere out in the desert, outside the confines of holy ground. It was a place associated with supernatural evil.

I believe Azazel is best taken as a proper name of a demonic entity. In the Day of Atonement ritual, the goat for Yahweh—the goat that was sacrificed—purifies the people of Israel and the Tabernacle/Temple. Sins were “atoned for” and what had been ritually unclean was sanctified and made holy. But purification only described part of what atonement meant. The point of the goat for Azazel was not that something was owed to the demonic realm, as though a ransom was being paid. The goat for Azazel banished the sins of the Israelites to the realm *outside* Israel. Why? Because the ground on which Yahweh had his dwelling was holy; the ground outside the parameters of the Israelite camp (or, nation, once the people were in the Land) had been consigned to fallen, demonic deities back at Babel. Sin could not be tolerated in the camp of Israel, for it was holy ground. Sins had to be “transported” to where evil belonged—the territory outside Israel under the control of gods set over the pagan nations.¹¹² The high priest was not sacrificing *to Azazel*. Rather, Azazel was getting what belonged to him: the ugly sinfulness of the nation.

Taking Azazel as a proper name explains another weird statement in the very next chapter of Leviticus (17:7): “So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore” (ESV). The Day of Atonement ritual was part of the solution to the practice of some Israelites to sacrifice to “goat demons.” We are not told why they did this, but the period of bondage in Egypt may have introduced them to deities identified with goat sacrifices, or they conceptually thought the demons of the wilderness needed to be kept at bay while on the way to the Promised Land. The latter has an Egyptian flavor to it, since Egyptians considered territory outside Egypt to be full of perils and chaotic forces. For Israelites, such sacrifices were ineffective and could descend to idolatry. Restrictions and prohibitions had to be made with respect to sacrifice. All sacrifices needed to occur at the tent of meeting (Lev. 17:1-7), and the Day of Atonement ritual was the only sanctioned “expulsion of sins” ritual.

While Christians associate the Law with Old Testament Israel and a thing of the past with respect to faith in Christ, the themes and issues we’ve touched on here have importance in the New Testament. There is still sacred space, cosmic geography, and spiritual evil in

the New Testament, though we often don't parse what we read in that way. We'll cover that ground eventually, but for now you just need your senses tuned. Our journey through the Old Testament and the theology of ancient Israel is far from over.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, F. F. Bruce's discussion of Gal. 3:19-20 in the NIGTC series, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1982), 175-180.

¹⁰⁶ See also Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 32:15-16; Deut. 4:13; 5:22.

¹⁰⁷ See for example Exod. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29; Psa 19:7; 119:88; 2 Kings 11:12; 2 Chron. 23:11.

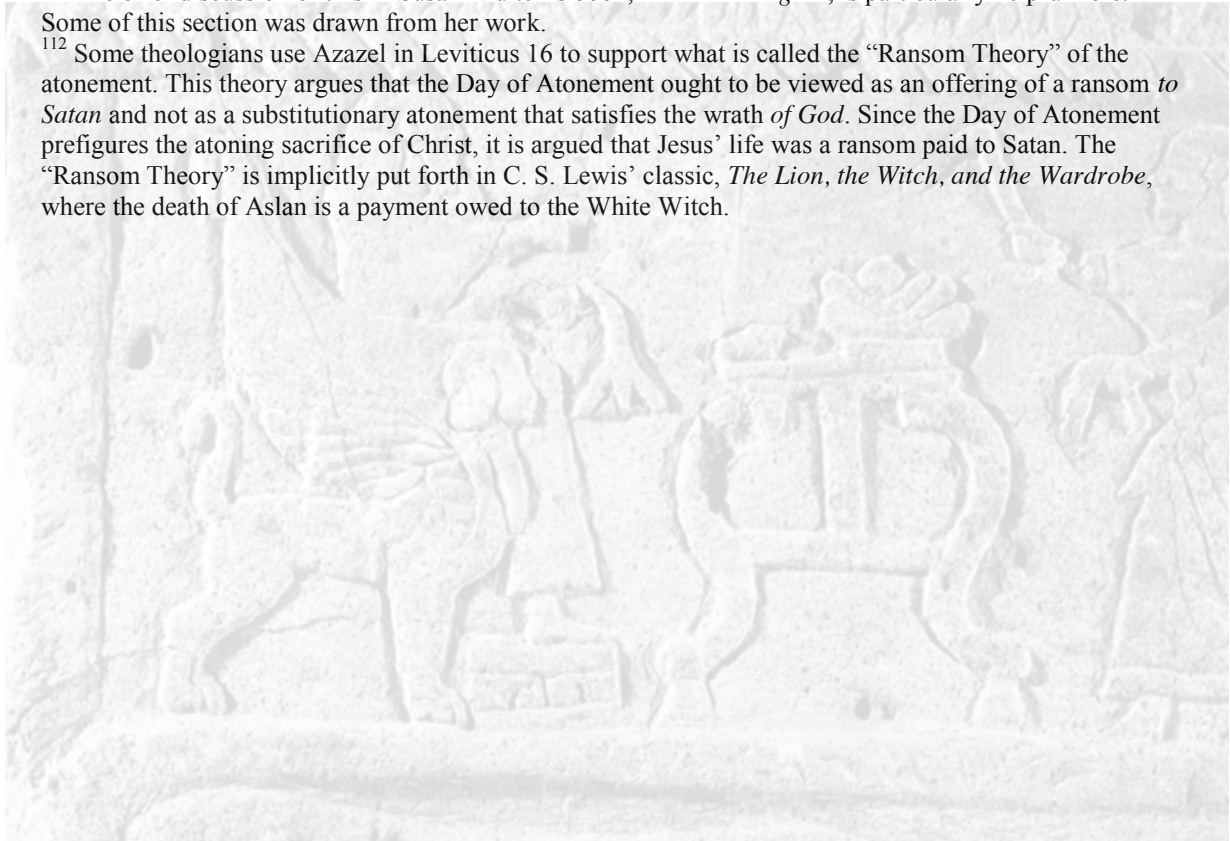
¹⁰⁸ See for example Exod. 16:34; 25:16, 21-22; 26:33-34; 27:21; 30:26; 31:7; 38:21; 40:3; Num 1:50; 9:15.

¹⁰⁹ Exod 30:6; Lev. 16:13.

¹¹⁰ John I. Durham, vol. 3, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus* (, Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 263.

¹¹¹ The brief discussion of this in Susan Niditch's book, *Israelite Religion*, is particularly helpful here. Some of this section was drawn from her work.

¹¹² Some theologians use Azazel in Leviticus 16 to support what is called the "Ransom Theory" of the atonement. This theory argues that the Day of Atonement ought to be viewed as an offering of a ransom to *Satan* and not as a substitutionary atonement that satisfies the wrath of *God*. Since the Day of Atonement prefigures the atoning sacrifice of Christ, it is argued that Jesus' life was a ransom paid to Satan. The "Ransom Theory" is implicitly put forth in C. S. Lewis' classic, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, where the death of Aslan is a payment owed to the White Witch.



Chapter 15

Follow the Template

The ultimate goal of the exodus from Egypt was, of course, the re-establishment of a family and kingdom for Yahweh on earth. Israel was to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:6), mediating the knowledge and will of the true God to all the nations of the earth. After all, God had told Abraham that it would be through his descendants, Yahweh’s portion (Deut 32:8-9), that all the nations disinherited at Babel would be blessed (Gen 12:1-3). And once that was done, Yahweh would transform the world into the second Eden.

Think about it. The disinherited nations would witness a strange spectacle. The nation of Israel was unusual for sure. It was a people who worshipped an invisible God in garden Temple that had no idols; a people who voluntarily obeyed a law handed down on a cosmic mountain by the invisible God embodied with his council; a people who considered their god the true God and themselves as part of His divine family; a people who had been supernaturally created by a God who had so spectacularly defeated Egypt and the other gods and people who had stood in their way so that they became dreaded (Deut. 11:25). Yahweh deliberately wanted his people to be “peculiar” or distinct, blessed above all nations, and utterly confident in his protection. Who wouldn’t want to be part of that? The establishment of Israel in the land, with the laws governing true worship and right relationships between Yahweh’s imager-children would be ground zero for a systematic reclamation of the nations he had disinherited back at Babel, so as to graft them back into his family as they turned their hearts to him. Anyway, that’s the way it was supposed to work.

As it turned out, this plan would only take hold with the coming of Jesus and his death and resurrection, which led to the birth of the new people of God, his temple, and Pentecost (see Chapters 22-28). The powers of darkness and human evil would once again win another round in the long war against God. But this, too, was foreseen. But before we explore what happened after Sinai, I want to help you look at God’s design for re-establishing his rule with his people on earth—to progressively restore what was lost at Babel and, ultimately, Eden. There were templates begun in Eden that get mirrored in the subsequent effort of God to re-establish his kingdom rule and defeat the free will rebellion of lost humanity and his unseen enemies.

The Seeds of Divine-Human Kingship on Earth

We’ve seen that the Tabernacle, the portable tent shrine carried by Israel throughout the time of these holy wars, was constructed and decorated as a reminder of the Edenic garden-mountain throne room of Yahweh. Even more elaborate was the Temple that

would eventually be built once Israel had won the Holy Land from its enemies. This visual reminder of Yahweh's original abode was a perpetual reminder that Yahweh desired to be king on earth among humanity. But from the very beginning, this kingship was to involve human co-rulers—Yahweh's imagers—who would represent the heavenly king on the earth.

Adam and Eve Yahweh's original imagers and thus given a status as steward-kings on the new earth. On one hand, humans were commissioned with maintaining and cultivating the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). This reflects a stewardship task. On the other hand, Adam and Eve are clearly given a kingly or ruling task. As Genesis 1:26-28 notes, they are to "have dominion" over the earth and "subdue" it.

The Hebrew terms underlying "have dominion" and "subdue" are used elsewhere in the Old Testament for the exercise of kingship and for the extension of a king's authority through his representatives. Examples would include:

1 Kings 4:22-24

²² Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of fine flour and sixty cors of meal, ²³ ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl. ²⁴ For he had dominion over all the region west of the Euphrates from Tiphseh to Gaza, over all the kings west of the Euphrates. And he had peace on all sides around him.

1 Kings 5:15-16

¹⁵ Solomon also had 70,000 burden-bearers and 80,000 stonecutters in the hill country, ¹⁶ besides Solomon's 3,300 chief officers who were over the work, who had charge of the people who carried on the work.

1 Chronicles 22:17-18

¹⁷ David also commanded all the leaders of Israel to help Solomon his son, saying, ¹⁸ "Is not the LORD your God with you? And has he not given you peace on every side? For he has delivered the inhabitants of the land into my hand, and the land is subdued before the LORD and his people.

2 Chronicles 8:10

¹⁰ And these were the chief officers of King Solomon, 250, who exercised authority over the people.

Psalms 110:1-2

¹ The LORD says to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand,

- until I make your enemies your footstool.”
- 2 The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your enemies!

A few other observations are in order. The Genesis account informs us that the ruler-steward imaging status was shared by both men and women since the commands in Gen. 1:26-28 are grammatically plural. The ruler-stewards had no priestly role. There was no sacrifice before the fall and no need for mediation with God, as the visible Yahweh walked in the garden with Adam and Eve. Yahweh’s council was also present on earth, as that was the location of Yahweh’s throne and abode.

Ultimate Sovereign	Yahweh (invisible; perhaps also visible before the Fall given the wording of Gen 3:8)
Ruling from	Earth (Eden; the impression given before the Fall is that the intent is global rule)
Shared Rulership	With humans; divine council also present
Divine Abode	On earth (Eden)
Chaos	Not present in Eden; part of natural world, but restrained.
Evil/Rebellion	Not present in Eden or anywhere else

The Fall of course disrupted this structure. Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden and the Scripture gives no hint that Yahweh and his council remained on earth in any tangible way, at least not in the way portrayed in the Eden narratives. The imager-ruler-steward status of Adam and Eve was not revoked, but would be more difficult due to the punishment of the curses for the Fall. Genesis 1:26-28 distributes the imaging status to all humans. The fact that Genesis 5:3 uses the language of Genesis 1:26-28 to describe Adam and Eve’s first offspring sustains that idea. After the Fall, however, humans had to assume a priestly role. Sacrifice for sin was now essential, and this was the responsibility of family head. Yahweh is still to be found, but humans are now cast in the role of seeking him out (Gen. 4:26) as opposed to Yahweh doing the seeking. Humans had to make themselves acceptable for contact with God, as opposed to being in such a state by default. Yahweh did still come to humans (e.g., Noah), but this was apparently the exception, not the rule.

A divinely imposed distance was therefore maintained between humans and Yahweh and his council. We know that it was not Yahweh’s intention that this effect of the Fall be permanent because of what Yahweh had said when pronouncing the curses. At some point, a descendant of Eve would undo the effects of the Fall, but would be opposed by the seed of the *nachash*, which, as we have overviewed in other chapters, were any human or non-human enemies of Yahweh and his people.

True to Yahweh’s prediction, certain seed of the *nachash* did make the situation worse. In Genesis 6 the sons of God violate the imposed boundary. Rebel members of the divine

council exploit humanity. As we saw earlier, the accounts in Genesis and *I Enoch* suggest several motives, among them the desire to usurp Yahweh's ruling relationship with humans, to be worshipped in place of Yahweh, and to turn Yahweh against humanity by increasing their wickedness. A peripheral result was also that the human seed from whence the Deliverer was put in peril. The situation might be illustrated this way:

Ultimate Sovereign	Yahweh (invisible)
Ruling from	The heavens (invisible spiritual realm); only sporadic biblical note of divine presence on earth (Enoch, Noah)
Shared Rulership	Humans still responsible for original mandate of Gen 1:28; now a struggle since no direct divine assistance from God or his council. A mode of stewardship but not assisting with divine rule since there is no specific divine enablement.
Divine Abode	The heavens (invisible spiritual realm)
Ruler in Darkness	The fallen <i>nachash</i> ; given domain over Sheol (not the usual term, but the less common one, <i>erets</i>); i.e., domain over the dead since his temptation led to human mortality by virtue of sin and expulsion from Eden. This domain (<i>erets</i>) is also the word for earth, and so the <i>nachash</i> is in combat with humanity for dominion of the earth. This is another obstacle to humans imaging God as intended.
Chaos (natural)	Eden is gone; the natural world is untamed but still restrained; curses aimed at adding burdens to this situation
Evil / rebellion	The <i>nachash</i> is now part of mortal life on earth; there is now a realm of the dead; The sons of God interfere with the human mandate (raise up seed, more imagers) by leaving their own realm and cohabiting with humans; motives are varied according to extra-biblical sources; the effect, if unchecked, would be the infection of the promised line from Eve, which would produce the deliverer of Gen 3:15, the one promised who would reverse the tragedy of Eden (sin and death); a human offspring was required to undo the human tragedy, but this promise accrues other elements as Old Testament theology progresses.

The Flood offered a temporary solution to the problems cause by the sons of God in Genesis 6, but not to the Fall. That Yahweh still wanted a kingdom on earth with human co-rulers is evident by the repetition of the commission to Adam and eve to the patriarch Noah after the Flood (Gen 9:1-2). As such, humankind was to spread Yahweh's kingdom over the earth. Humanity did the exact opposite at Babel, refusing to overspread the earth and desiring to re-create the Edenic council conditions on their own terms. We know the result: the nations were disinherited, effectively ending Yahweh's vision of divine-human

co-regency on earth. As such, the ruling relationships changed. I've illustrated the ruling structures after Genesis 6 up to Babel and after Babel this way:

Ultimate Sovereign	Yahweh (invisible)
Ruling from	The heavens (invisible spiritual realm); no divine presence on earth after Noah until the call of Abraham.
Shared Rulership	Humans still responsible for original mandate of Gen 1:28), but attention now shifts to one human family with whom rulership will be shared. Will change with the call of Abraham.
Divine Abode	The heavens (invisible spiritual realm). Will change with the call of Abraham.
Ruler in Darkness	The fallen <i>nachash</i>; given domain over Sheol (not the usual term, but the less common one, <i>erets</i>); i.e., domain over the dead since his temptation led to human mortality by virtue of sin and expulsion from Eden. This domain (<i>erets</i>) is also the word for earth, and so the <i>nachash</i> is in combat with humanity for dominion of the earth. This is another obstacle to humans imaging God as intended.
Chaos (natural)	Eden is gone; the natural world is untamed but still restrained; curses aimed at adding burdens to this situation
Evil / rebellion	Humanity is forsaken by Yahweh; they are undependable and self-willed; Yahweh will have to raise up a new family with which to share rulership on earth via the divine presence. Humanity, though forsaken, is not destroyed; the nations put under lesser sons of God (consigned to them, as it were); Yahweh will call Abraham and will create a new family from him, through whom the disinherited nations will be brought back into the family.

The end of a divine-human ruling relationship on earth under Yahweh was quickly revived when Yahweh called Abraham immediately after the Babel debacle. With the call of Abraham and the ensuing covenant promises Yahweh made with Abraham and his descendants, the divine-human ruling structures were kickstarted and operated alongside the administrations of the sons of God over the disinherited nations. Yahweh was sovereign over both arrangements, but he only had a personal investment with Abraham's family (who would become known as Israel). In the illustrations below, note how the "administration of the disinherited" parallels Yahweh's more personal dealings with patriarchal Israel. Eventually, when the patriarchal existence of Israel gave way to nationhood after the exodus, the parallels become even sharper.

Set side by side, we see some important similarities and differences with the way Yahweh runs the disinherited nations and his own "portion" Israel. After Babel, Yahweh re-instituted the device of having a human co-ruler over his children. Prior to the Fall,

Adam and Eve were to be co-regents over Yahweh's children—at the time, all humanity. After God abandoned humanity at Babel and chose Abraham to start over, Abraham and his chosen heir (Isaac, then Jacob) became the leader of Yahweh's people. It was to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that Yahweh appeared, securing the status of those patriarchs as Yahweh's human co-ruler of Yahweh's people. That system evolved into the headship of Moses, Joshua after him, and eventually kings.

Ultimate Sovereign	Yahweh (invisible)	
Ruling from	The heavens (invisible spiritual realm); The divine presence re-appears to Abraham, at times embodied (e.g. the Word; Gen 15:1; cp. Gen 18). Hints of a Promised Land, where Yahweh will be God his people—Israel, the people of Abraham—are dropped in the covenant terms (Gen 12:1-3).	Getting to this land as the people of God is the point of the exodus from Egypt after the patriarchal age. Eventually the kingdom of Israel is in the land and reaches the borders described to the patriarchs (but the post-Mosaic borders / dimensions differ; they are larger). God rules in visible form (Angel, Word) during the wilderness wanderings through the monarchy.
Shared Rulership	Humans still responsible for original mandate of Gen 1:28), but attention now shifts to one human family with whom rulership will be shared. Biblical writers use language reminiscent of divine council beings to telegraph this intent of human-divine sonship (e.g., Israel will be as the stars of heaven; Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 37:9; Deut 1:10; 1 Chron 27:23; cp. Job 38:7-8).	Israel is called the corporate son of God (Exod 4:23); God rules in visible form (Angel, Word) during the wilderness wanderings, with Joshua, with Samuel, and with kings David and Solomon. After the monarchy divides he will call prophets by such an appearance to continue the co-authority motif. God shares his rulership with Moses and other chosen authorities – seventy elders. The structure of single ruler with 70 over the people is adopted from ancient divine council structures. Eventually the divine sonship / divine imager/steward role is embodied in Israel's king (who takes ultimate form in the messiah, the promised seed of Eve).
Divine Abode	The heavens (invisible spiritual realm); will be eventually in the land.	Tent of Meeting / Tabernacle; Temple
Ruler in Darkness	The fallen <i>nachash</i> ; given domain over Sheol (not the usual term, but the less common one, <i>erets</i>); i.e.,	Still lord of the dead; relationship to the other spiritual enemies is unclear, though the

	domain over the dead since his temptation led to human mortality by virtue of sin and expulsion from Eden. This domain (<i>erets</i>) is also the word for earth, and so the <i>nachash</i> is in combat with humanity for dominion of the earth. This is another obstacle to humans imaging God as intended.	lines are blurred in Sheol with the presence of the Rephaim.
Chaos (natural)	Eden is gone; the natural world is untamed but still restrained; curses aimed at adding burdens to this situation	The Tabernacle and Temple had Edenic garden imagery; intended to be a heaven (Eden) on earth.
Evil / rebellion	Humanity is forsaken by Yahweh; they are undependable and self-willed; Yahweh will have to raise up a new family with which to share rulership on earth via the divine presence. Humanity, though forsaken, is not destroyed; the nations put under lesser sons of God (consigned to them, as it were); Yahweh calls Abraham and will create a new family from him, through whom the disinherited nations will be brought back into the family.	The gods of the nations become corrupt (Psa 82); Israel falls repeatedly into error by worshipping them; descendants of the Nephilim bloodlines oppose the conquest of the land and are specifically targeted by Joshua (see Chapters 16-17); a holy war on unseen and seen levels; reflected in the concepts of cosmic geography.

It is interesting to note that the disinherited nations had no king on earth appointed by Yahweh, but there was in fact a single non-human ruler over the earth sentenced to that role by Yahweh: the *nachash*. You may recall from our discussion in Chapter 5 that the account of the *nachash* in Genesis 3 has parallels in Isaiah 14, where the Shining One, son of the dawn (Helel ben Shachar in Hebrew; “Lucifer” in the Latin Vulgate) was consigned to the *erets* after trying to vault himself above the Most High God. The Hebrew word *erets*, as noted in that earlier chapter, means “earth” and also, in certain passages, the domain of the human dead and the *Nephilim/Rephaim* spirits, the demons.¹¹³ The double entendre is significant. While there are no passages that describe explicit hierarchical links between the *nachash* and the demons, it is easy to see how his former council standing had been a superior rank to those demons who had never served in the council, and how the *nachash* could be perceived as the pre-eminent villain, the ultimate adversary (the *satan*)¹¹⁴ to Yahweh. The original offending sons of God of Genesis 6 have no direct connection to the *nachash* either. Since they were imprisoned by Yahweh in the “abyss” that is part of the *erets* / Underworld, it is not difficult to see, however, that they too would be associated with the *nachash*, since his domain is the *erets*. Additionally, the sons of God whom Yahweh set over the nations, the enemies of

his portion Israel, are never actually said to “work for” the *nachash*. Rather, they work for Yahweh on earth. As we will see in Chapter 20, though, they become corrupt and are sentenced in Psalm 82 to a certain but future death, as are all other enemies of Yahweh—the seed of the *nachash*. All of this is backdrop to the statement in Matthew 25:41, where hellfire was “prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Lastly, notice from the illustration that the disinherited nations are ruled by 70 sons of God. The number 70, as we noted in an earlier chapter, is the traditional Canaanite number for the second tier of the divine council, the sons of God. It is also a number that matches the number of disinherited nations when one counts the names listed in Table of Nations in Genesis 10, which sets up the story of the Tower of Babel in the Genesis narrative.

The “mirror council” rule of Yahweh’s portion also includes a group of 70—the 70 elders of Israel. I mentioned this group back in Chapter 11, and noted a connection between these men and the advice of Moses’ father-in-law that Moses choose men to help him govern Israel. Exodus 18 describes that decision.

References to “elders” in Israel can be found before Jethro gave such advice to Moses (Exod. 3:16-18; 4:29; 12:21; 17:5-6) and verses such as Numbers 11:16, 24 suggest that there were more than 70 elders (“gather for me seventy men from the elders...”). Since no number of the advisers chosen by Moses is ever given in the account, and since these men were placed “over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens” (Exod. 18:21), it is certain that the number of men who helped govern Israel under Moses was much larger than 70. But within that larger number, several passages indicate that there were 70 elders who had a special governing role, for they were privileged to see Yahweh and the council with Moses, and were commissioned by Yahweh himself to govern.¹¹⁵

Exodus 24:1-2, 9

Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. ² Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.” . . . ⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.

Numbers 11:16-18, 24-25

¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. ¹⁷ And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with

you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.¹⁸ And say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, “Who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt.” Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. . . .²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent.²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

The entirety of Chapter 19 is devoted to the fact that divine commissioning such as we read in the Numbers 11 passage is a recurring theme intimately associated with the divine council. It is sufficient here to only remind you that Yahweh in the cloud and in his tent dwelling is a stock description of the place where the divine council is. What we have here is Yahweh, in the presence of his council, commissioning the earthly counterpart to that council, the 70 elders. Originally, all humans were to serve Yahweh in this way, but the demise of the Edenic situation interrupted that goal. When re-establishing his kingly rule on earth through Israel, Yahweh begins by electing a human co-ruler and a “mirror council” to represent his authority over his earthly family. But this was just the beginning. As we’ll see in subsequent chapters, God’s ultimate Edenic purpose to have all his children rule all the nations was still the target goal. For now, we need to turn our attention to the human co-ruler, the king.

¹¹³ For example, the underworld was considered the “land” of the dead (cf. Job 10:21-22; Jer 17:13; Jonah 2:7; Psa 71:20; Isa. 63:10). See my article in *Vetus Testamentum* on Isaiah 14 and Ugaritic for more details.

¹¹⁴ See the comments in Chapter 1 on “the satan”—how the word “satan” is not a proper noun in the OT but becomes a proper noun later on.

¹¹⁵ See Chapter 18 for the significance of the commissioning act.

Chapter 16

Like a Bad Penny

It's hard to imagine the herd of unkempt humanity camped at Sinai as a turning point in the cosmic plan of God for planet earth, but it was. For centuries the idea of a people of God was a faded concept, an idea whose death was prolonged in the brick pits along the Nile only for the sake of the hubris of successive dynasties of Pharaohs convinced they had been spawned by the gods of that allotment of dirt known as Egypt. But at the right time—a chronology extended by the will of Yahweh for several reasons we'll note in a moment—the visible Yahweh appeared to the AWOL murderer Moses and announced that the status quo was about to change.

And change it did. After demanding Pharaoh release his “son” from bondage (Exod. 4:22-23), Yahweh toyed with the gods of Egypt in a show of power that should have lasted much longer in the minds of the Israel than it did. Yahweh gathered his people to Sinai and gave the nation its constitution, the Law, a means of maintaining the sanctity of their relationship with Yahweh. He gave them a place of worship designed to remind them of the symbiotic relationship of the heavenly council and themselves as imagers of Yahweh chosen to be a kingdom of priests, conduits to the disinherited nations. *Who is like Yahweh among the gods?* How quickly they forgot.

The Seeds of Holy War

Understanding what happens next in the cosmic narrative of the Bible requires recalling our earlier discussion of the “seed of the *nachash*” and the Nephilim. The seed of the *nachash* referred to the ongoing struggle between all who would take sides against Yahweh and his children. This struggle was part of the curses handed out after the Fall, when Yahweh dropped the hint that the Fall would one day be undone by the seed of the woman—a human being descended from Eve. The seed of the woman would be opposed and threatened by the seed of the *nachash*, the evil Shining One.

As I noted earlier, the seed of the *nachash* is a term applied to evil people (“you are of your father the devil”), but also includes a supernatural element. Specifically, the first threat to what we understand as the messianic line came as a result of the transgression of heaven and earth in Genesis 6:1-4 that produced the Nephilim. Although there is no evidence that the reason for the transgression was to destroy the line of Eve, that threat was indeed a residual effect.

The interference with the normal human lines of descent from Eve by the sons of God threatened the divine promise to undo the effects of the Fall in three ways. First, the deliverer needed to be truly human, a full descendant of Eve. Second, it was Yahweh's intention—albeit an intention revealed much later—that this deliverer be the full human

incarnation of his own essence. The second Yahweh, the visual, physical Yahweh, would one day become fully human by birth and deliver the human race. The influence of another supernatural presence manifested in fleshly form violated both parts of the plan. Third, the descendants of the sons of God, the Nephilim and their descendants, were a physical peril to God's children. The flood didn't put an end to the Nephilim problem, nor would it rescind the curse of that the seed of the *nachash* would be the nemesis of the divine plan. The Nephilim clans were not only lethal enemies, but they were potentially an ongoing hazard to the purity of the necessary lineage through intermarriage. Like a bad penny, they just keep turning up in the story, and it's never good. All of this is why, in the wake of the exodus, God decided that the problem needed a permanent resolution.

I know the idea that Genesis 6:1-4 is what contextualizes the wars of Joshua sounds pretty strange. You've probably never heard that before, so you'll likely need some convincing. Frankly, it's been right under our noses the whole time. You've read it before but didn't realize what you were looking at. We'll find in this chapter and the next that there was a rationale for the variation in the language of conquest. Sometimes—rarely, actually—the Israelites were told to utterly destroy certain people; at other times driving them away was sufficient. What made the difference? The Nephilim connection.

The point that I'll be arguing for here and in the next chapter is simple: the peoples targeted for extermination in Israel's holy war for the Land were descendants of the Nephilim, or those living among those descendants. The objective was the elimination of the line originally fathered by the fallen sons of God, not wanton destruction of "normal" human life. Israel could take no chance that the perceived "demon seed" of the Nephilim surviving in the Land. Those who were perceived as being in these clans or likely marrying into these lines were to be eliminated as a preventative to the deliverer's line being corrupted or cut off.

Israel left Sinai with its mission to claim the terrestrial allotment promised to their forefathers by Yahweh with the visible Yahweh himself leading them. Let's look once more at a pivotal passage, but this time we need to observe a bit more of that passage. I've double-underlined the most important parts for this chapter:

Exodus 23:20-24

²⁰ "Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared." ²¹ Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. ²² "But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries." ²³ "When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out," ²⁴ you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces.

You're probably thinking, "he's not really going to talk about all those "-ites" is he?" Well . . . yes. Hang in there. You won't be bored—I promise. I think it'll blow your mind, actually.

Let's start with the first name in the list, the Amorites. You no doubt have read about them before, as they are noted in some very familiar passages. In Genesis 15:12-16 we read:

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

In Yahweh's eyes, the Amorites were an evil people, whose judgment would coincide with the deliverance of Abraham's—and His own—people from a foreign land which held them in bondage. The reference and the chronology, of course, refer to the Egyptian bondage and the exodus out of Egypt. But why pick on the Amorites? Why do they seem so detestable to Yahweh?

Most commentators will point out the obvious here, that the Amorites worshipped idols and foreign gods, and likely engaged in horrible practices in that worship. 1 Kings 21:26 tells us that much. But that could be said of practically any pagan group in the area of Palestine who did not worship Yahweh. Why single the Amorites out? We get our answer in an obscure passage of the book of Amos, a passage where God reminds Israel of the conquest of the Amorites after the exodus:

Amos 2:9-10

9 "Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong as the oaks; I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath. 10 Also it was I who brought you up out of the land of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite.

What was different about the Amorites destroyed by Israelites as part of the conquest of the Promised Land? They were unusually tall. Sound like anyone we've run into before?

The historical material on the Amorites is sparse. Interestingly, the word for "Amorite" actually comes from a Sumerian word ("MAR.TU") which vaguely referred to the area and population west of Sumer / Babylon and hence foreign to them. It could, therefore, simply refer to foreigners or peoples who inhabited the area northwest (following the Tigris and Euphrates river valley) of Mesopotamia. The point is that the term is very broad and non-specific. Even in the Bible we find that there were Amorites who were

allies of the people of God. In Genesis 14:13, for instance, an Amorite is said to have been an ally to Abraham. But some of those Amorites were very tall and thus targeted by God for destruction. This is a pattern that will emerge as we go, and I for one don't think it's coincidental.

I just mentioned Abraham, so let's stick with him. The Genesis 14:13 passage that has an Amorite allied with him is noteworthy since it is part of a story that includes some important people group names for our purposes here:

Genesis 14:1-16

¹ In the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim, ² these kings made war with Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). ³ And all these joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). ⁴ Twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. ⁵ In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, ⁶ and the Horites in their hill country of Seir as far as El-paran on the border of the wilderness. ⁷ Then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh) and defeated all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who were dwelling in Hazazon-tamar. ⁸ Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out, and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim ⁹ with Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar, four kings against five. ¹⁰ Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country. ¹¹ So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. ¹² They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way. ¹³ Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner. These were allies of Abram. ¹⁴ When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. ¹⁵ And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus. ¹⁶ Then he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people.

The passage is a bit confusing, but the basics are that way back in the time of Abraham, a confederation of kings led by a fellow named Chedorlaomer went to war with another confederation of kings led by the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah. We don't really care about the politics of all this—but we do care about verse 5-8. Here we learn that God had providentially used Chedorlaomer and his cronies to eliminate certain specified people groups in the area: the Rephaim, the Zuzim, the Emim, and the Amorites. We've already seen that the Amorites who were targeted later on in the days of Moses and Joshua were

unusually tall. What about these Amorites? Is there anything to suggest the same characteristic?

I think you already know the answer. “Amorite” in this list is juxtaposed with the Rephaim, who are associated with the Underworld, the realm of the dead, in the Old Testament. They are also one of the giant clans descended from the Nephilim —and so are all the other people groups in this listing. How can we be sure of all this? Hold on . . . the ride’s going to get pretty wild.

The Fate of the Nephilim in Jewish Theology

Unlike the biblical account of the Nephilim, other ancient Jewish texts like the book of *I Enoch* present a different, more detailed picture. In a conversation cast between God and Enoch, *I Enoch* 15 relates what happened after the destruction of the Nephilim giants:

¹ And He [God] answered and said to me, and I heard His voice: ‘Fear not, Enoch, thou righteous man and scribe of righteousness: approach hither and hear my voice. ² And go, say to the Watchers of heaven, who have sent thee to intercede for them: “You should intercede for men, and not men for you: ³ Wherefore have ye left the high, holy, and eternal heaven, and lain with women, and defiled yourselves with the daughters of men and taken to yourselves wives, and done like the children of earth, and begotten giants (as your) sons? ⁴ And though ye were holy, spiritual, living the eternal life, you have defiled yourselves with the blood of women, and have begotten (children) with the blood of flesh, and, as the children of men, have lusted after flesh and blood as those also do who die and perish. ⁵ Therefore have I given them wives also that they might impregnate them, and beget children by them, that thus nothing might be wanting to them on earth. ⁶ But you were formerly spiritual, living the eternal life, and immortal for all generations of the world. ⁷ And therefore I have not appointed wives for you; for as for the spiritual ones of the heaven, in heaven is their dwelling. ⁸ And now, the giants, who are produced from the spirits and flesh, shall be called evil spirits upon the earth, and on the earth shall be their dwelling. ⁹ Evil spirits have proceeded from their bodies; because they are born from men and from the holy Watchers is their beginning and primal origin; they shall be evil spirits on earth, and evil spirits shall they be called. ¹⁰ [As for the spirits of heaven, in heaven shall be their dwelling, but as for the spirits of the earth which were born upon the earth, on the earth shall be their dwelling.] ¹¹ And the spirits of the giants afflict, oppress, destroy, attack, do battle, and work destruction on the earth, and cause trouble: they take no food, but nevertheless hunger and thirst, and cause offences. ¹² And these spirits shall rise up against the children of men and against the women, because they have proceeded from them. ¹¹⁶

The passage is interesting, to say the least. According to this text, the beings we think of as demons or “evil spirits” are actually the spirits of deceased Nephilim. Upon their death, the “supernatural half” of the Nephilim, their spirits, “proceeded from their bodies”

and became “evil spirits on earth.” These disembodied demonic entities roam the earth to afflict and harass humanity.

Scholars of ancient and rabbinical Judaism have pointed out for some time that the explanation for the origin of demons put forth in *1 Enoch* 15 is the standard answer for Jewish theology as to where demons came from. But the book of *1 Enoch* is not in the biblical canon, and so cannot be regarded as inspired. We just have to let the origin of demons remain a mystery since the Bible doesn’t teach this . . . or does it?

The Giant Clans After the Flood

To answer this question we need to take a look at events that transpired well after the flood in biblical chronology. We return first to a now familiar passage from Numbers 13:25-33, which describes the inhabitants of the land intended for the Israelites, inhabitants of unusual height:

²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. ²⁶ And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan.” ³⁰ But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” ³¹ Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” ³² So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. ³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

The passage very plainly describes the Anakim, the “sons of Anak,” as very tall. It also explicitly connects the Anakim to the Nephilim, the former deriving from the latter in terms of lineage. After this incident in the days of Moses, the Israelites are punished by God for their lack of faith. They are sentenced to wander in the wilderness for forty years. They eventually start heading back toward Canaan near the end of this forced pilgrimage, but on the other side of the Jordan River. God through Moses instructs the people to go through the Transjordan. A close look at some Old Testament passages that few would call exciting reveals some fascinating details about this part of their journey back to the Promised Land. Note the underlined portions of the excerpts from Deuteronomy 2:

Deuteronomy 2

⁸ So we went on, away from our brothers, the people of Esau, who live in Seir, away from the Arabah road from Elath and Ezion-geber. “And we turned and went in the direction of the wilderness of Moab. ⁹ And the LORD said to me, ‘Do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the people of Lot for a possession.’ ¹⁰ (The Emim formerly lived there, a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim. ¹¹ Like the Anakim they are also counted as Rephaim, but the Moabites call them Emim. ¹² The Horites also lived in Seir formerly, but the people of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place, as Israel did to the land of their possession, which the LORD gave to them.) ¹³ ‘Now rise up and go over the brook Zered.’ So we went over the brook Zered. ¹⁴ And the time from our leaving Kadesh-barnea until we crossed the brook Zered was thirty-eight years, until the entire generation, that is, the men of war, had perished from the camp, as the LORD had sworn to them. ¹⁵ For indeed the hand of the LORD was against them, to destroy them from the camp, until they had perished. ¹⁶ “So as soon as all the men of war had perished and were dead from among the people, ¹⁷ the LORD said to me, ¹⁸ ‘Today you are to cross the border of Moab at Ar. ¹⁹ And when you approach the territory of the people of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession.’ ²⁰ (It is also counted as a land of Rephaim. Rephaim formerly lived there—but the Ammonites call them Zamzummim— ²¹ a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim; but the LORD destroyed them before the Ammonites, and they dispossessed them and settled in their place . . . ²⁶ “So I sent messengers from the wilderness of Kedemoth to Sihon the king of Heshbon, with words of peace, saying, ²⁷ ‘Let me pass through your land. I will go only by the road; I will turn aside neither to the right nor to the left. ²⁸ You shall sell me food for money, that I may eat, and give me water for money, that I may drink. Only let me pass through on foot, ²⁹ as the sons of Esau who live in Seir and the Moabites who live in Ar did for me, until I go over the Jordan into the land that the LORD our God is giving to us.’ ³⁰ But Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him, for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might give him into your hand, as he is this day.

We learn several things of note from this passage. Inhabitants known among the Moabites and Ammonites as, respectively, the Emim and the Zamzummim, had populated the Transjordan in the days of Esau, well before the bondage in Egypt. The Emim are described as “tall as the Anakim,” and were considered “Rephaim.” This very explicitly links the Emim to the Nephilim. The Emim / Rephaim had been removed from the area of Moab before Israel’s arrival at this time in their history, paving the way for safe passage—at least through Moab. The next leg of the journey was northward through the territory of Ammon (v. 19). Moving to Deuteronomy 3 we read:

“Then we turned and went up the way to Bashan. And Og the king of Bashan came out against us, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. ² But the LORD said

to me, ‘Do not fear him, for I have given him and all his people and his land into your hand. And you shall do to him as you did to Sihon the king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon.’ ³ So the LORD our God gave into our hand Og also, the king of Bashan, and all his people, and we struck him down until he had no survivor left. ⁴ And we took all his cities at that time—there was not a city that we did not take from them—sixty cities, the whole region of Argob, the kingdom of Og in Bashan. ⁵ All these were cities fortified with high walls, gates, and bars, besides very many unwallled villages. ⁶ And we devoted them to destruction, as we did to Sihon the king of Heshbon, devoting to destruction every city, men, women, and children. ⁷ But all the livestock and the spoil of the cities we took as our plunder. ⁸ So we took the land at that time out of the hand of the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, from the Valley of the Arnon to Mount Hermon ⁹ (the Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, while the Amorites call it Senir), ¹⁰ all the cities of the tableland and all Gilead and all Bashan, as far as Salecah and Edrei, cities of the kingdom of Og in Bashan. ¹¹ (For only Og the king of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. Behold, his bed was a bed of iron. Is it not in Rabbah of the Ammonites? Nine cubits was its length, and four cubits its breadth, according to the common cubit.)

Notice that two kings are mentioned here, both of whom clashed with Israel and paid a terrible price. These two kings were Sihon and Og, collectively referred to as “the two kings of the Amorites.” The extent of their kingdom was “from the Valley of the Arnon to Mount Hermon . . . all the cities of the tableland and all Gilead and all Bashan, as far as Salecah and Edrei.”

Demonic Geography

These become more than dry geographical details when we observe two details in Deuteronomy 3. First, verse 11 informs us that Og of Bashan was one of the Rephaim. Right on the heels of letting readers know Og’s status as one of the Rephaim, the writer describes the immense dimensions of his “bed” (probably a sarcophagus), roughly 6 feet wide by 13.5 feet long. Second, the territorial description mentions Mount Hermon. Mount Hermon was, according to *1 Enoch* 6:1-6, the mountain to which the Watchers, the sons of God, descended when they came to earth and cohabited with human women. This connection with the incident described in Genesis 6:1-4 is consistent in view of the connections between the terms Rephaim, Anakim, and Nephilim. Third, the broader area of which Mount Hermon was part was Bashan, a place of special cosmic-geographical significance, as we’ll see in a moment.

Other passages confirm the connections between the Rephaim giants and Mount Hermon. For example, in Joshua 12:1-5 (ESV we read:

Now these are the kings of the land whom the people of Israel defeated and took possession of their land beyond the Jordan toward the sunrise, from the Valley of the Arnon to Mount Hermon, with all the Arabah eastward: ² Sihon king of the Amorites who lived at Heshbon and ruled from Aroer, which is on the edge of the

Valley of the Arnon, and from the middle of the valley as far as the river Jabbok, the boundary of the Ammonites, that is, half of Gilead,³ and the Arabah to the Sea of Chinneroth eastward, and in the direction of Beth-jeshimoth, to the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, southward to the foot of the slopes of Pisgah;⁴ and Og king of Bashan, one of the remnant of the Rephaim, who lived at Ashtaroth and at Edrei⁵ and ruled over Mount Hermon and Salecah and all Bashan to the boundary of the Geshurites and the Maacathites, and over half of Gilead to the boundary of Sihon king of Heshbon.

The passage from Joshua 12 links the Rephaim giants to Mount Hermon, but also associates them with two other cities of specific note, Ashtaroth and Edrei. Other passages confirm that these cities and their surrounding areas were populated by Rephaim.¹¹⁷ Additionally, this Rephaim presence was partnered with the Amorites, another unusually tall people (Amos 2:9-10).

Ashtaroth and Edrei are significant since the ancient literature of Ugarit (a small ancient kingdom north of Lebanon) mentions them as two places associated with the *rapiuma*—the Ugaritic word for Rephaim.¹¹⁸ The Rephaim of Ugarit are not described as giants, but they are described as “divine” at Ugarit. They are deified dead royal ancestors—the spirits of the great warrior kings who inhabit the Underworld. If this sounds like an echo of the Nephilim of Genesis 6:4 who are also referred to as mighty warriors (*gibborim*) and “men of renown,” your intuition would be correct. The early Jewish notion found most explicitly in *1 Enoch* that what we know as demons are the departed spirits of dead Nephilim has a biblical parallel. Let’s unpack this a bit more.

The Hebrew term for the Underworld is “Sheol.” You may have seen it before in the notes of your study Bible at certain passages. The concept of Sheol is very complex, as the word is used in several ways. Sheol most often is a very general term for “the grave,” the place everyone goes to when they die. Both the wicked and the righteous go there—everyone dies and goes to the grave.¹¹⁹ In the Old Testament, the grave is nearly always described negatively or neutrally. Israelites were like any of us—they weren’t enthusiastic about dying since there was uncertainty about precisely what happened to you when you died.¹²⁰

The above may be quite new to readers, and so illustrating the presence of the Rephaim in Sheol in the biblical text is in order.

Isaiah 14:9-15 (ESV)

- ⁹ Sheol beneath is stirred up
to meet you when you come;
it rouses the shades (in Hebrew, Rephaim) to greet you,
all who were leaders of the earth;
it raises from their thrones
all who were kings of the nations.
- ¹⁰ All of them will answer

- and say to you:
‘You too have become as weak as we!
You have become like us!’
- 11 Your pomp is brought down to Sheol,
the sound of your harps;
maggots are laid as a bed beneath you,
and worms are your covers.
- 12 “How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
- 13 You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far reaches of the north;
- 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.’
- 15 But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the far reaches of the pit.

This first passage is already familiar—Isaiah’s taunt against the King of Babylon where he utilizes the story of the fall of Helel, the *nachash*, to amplify how pompous and arrogant the king of Babylon was.¹²¹ Let’s turn to some other texts.

Psalms 88:10-12 (Hebrew Bible, vv. 11-13)

- 10 Do you work wonders for the dead (in Hebrew, Rephaim)?
Do the departed rise up to praise you? *Selah*
- 11 Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
- 12 Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

Job 26

- 1 Then Job answered and said:
2 “How you have helped him who has no power!
How you have saved the arm that has no strength!
3 How you have counseled him who has no wisdom,
and plentifully declared sound knowledge!
4 With whose help have you uttered words,
and whose breath has come out from you?
5 The dead (in Hebrew, Rephaim) tremble
under the waters and their inhabitants.

⁶ Sheol is naked before God,
and Abaddon has no covering.

In most instances where Sheol is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, a place where all the dead go *and remain* is in view. Other passages suggest that the righteous await a *future* time of being present with God, but the unrighteous—and particularly the sinister Rephaim dead—are permanent residents.

That the Israelites and the biblical writers considered the spirits of the dead giant warrior-kings to be demonic is evident from the fearful aura attached to the geographical location of Bashan. As noted above, Bashan is the region of the cities Ashtarothe and Edrei, which both the Bible and the Ugaritic texts mention as abodes of the Rephaim. What's even more fascinating is that in the Ugaritic language, this region was known not as Bashan, but *Bathan*—the Semitic people of Ugarit pronounced the Hebrew “sh” as “th” in their dialect. Why is that of interest? Because “Bathan” is a common word across all the Semitic languages, biblical Hebrew included, for “serpent.”¹²² The region of Bashan was known as “the place of the serpent.” It was ground zero for the Rephaim giant clan and, spiritually speaking, the gateway to the abode of the infernal deified Rephaim spirits.

But there's more. In Ugaritic literature, the Rephaim of Ashtarothe and Edrei are called “kings” and “gods.” The word for “kings” in Hebrew is *melakim*—and the Ugaritic language had the same consonants, *mlkm*. However, at Ugarit the title *mlkm* also meant something else—to be a subject of the god Milkom (also known as Molech or Malik). Notice that the consonants in “Milkom” are *mlkm*. One Ugaritic tablet specifically refers to Ashtarothe as the abode of Milkom/Malik. Cuneiform texts from other civilizations in Mesopotamia refer to these *mlkm* as gods, specifically the Anunnaki gods, gods who inhabited Sheol under the lord of the Underworld and of fire, Nergal.¹²³

Malik/Milcom was associated with child sacrifice in the Old Testament (2 Kings 23:10,13). He is referred to as “the abomination of the Ammonites” in 1 Kings 11:5,7, and is specifically said to receive such sacrifices while residing in Sheol (Isa. 57:9). Milcom was also worshipped at another demonic stronghold in Israelite thinking—the Valley of Hinnom. The phrase “Valley of Hinnom” in Hebrew is pronounced *ge-hinnom*.¹²⁴ We get the word “Gehenna” from it, since that is the way it is referred to in Greek in the New Testament. In New Testament theology this was Hell or Hades. *Ge-Hinnom* in Hebrew most likely means “valley of wailing,” an understandable description given the child sacrifice that took place there. The Valley of Hinnom was the place that King Ahaz and king Manasseh sacrificed their own sons as burnt offerings to Molech (2 Chr 28:3; 33:6). These sacrifices took place at ritual centers called *topheth* (“burning place”) and later the Valley of Hinnom became referred to by the place name Topheth (Jer 7:32; 19:6).

The Valley of Hinnom was also geographically associated with a regional Rephaim stronghold in Joshua 15:8. In describing the allotted land for the tribe of Judah, the writer states, “then the boundary goes up by the Valley of the Son of Hinnom at the southern

shoulder of the Jebusite (that is, Jerusalem). And the boundary goes up to the top of the mountain that lies over against the Valley of Hinnom, on the west, at the northern end of the Valley of the Rephaim.” In perhaps clearer terms, the Valley of the Rephaim lies between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Its northern end opens into the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna), which is immediately south of Jerusalem. The Valley of the Rephaim is mentioned in several passages in the Old Testament, and was often the place where the Philistines gathered for battle.¹²⁵ In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this valley is called “Valley of the Giants” (Greek, *gigantes*).

The Philistines, of course, are very familiar to readers due to the most famous giant in the Bible, Goliath. We all know about Goliath’s height, but is he specifically connected to the Rephaim or the Anakim—and hence the *nephilim*—in any way? The answer is yes. Recalling that Goliath was *from Gath* (1 Samuel 17:23), the following verses make the connection quite clear, and in a sort of “back door” way, affirm yet again that the Nephilim were considered giants, not “normal” human progeny:

Joshua 11 (ESV)

²¹ And Joshua came at that time and cut off the Anakim from the hill country, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from all the hill country of Judah, and from all the hill country of Israel. Joshua devoted them to destruction with their cities. ²² There was none of the Anakim left in the land of the people of Israel. Only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod did some remain.

I Chronicles 20 (ESV)

⁴ And after this there arose war with the Philistines at Gezer. Then Sibbecai the Hushathite struck down Sippai, who was one of the descendants of the giants (the Hebrew text reads “Rephaim”), and the Philistines were subdued. ⁵ And there was again war with the Philistines, and Elhanan the son of Jair struck down Lahmi the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam. ⁶ And there was again war at Gath, where there was a man of great stature, who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number, and he also was descended from the giants (the Hebrew text reads “from the Rapha” – the Rephaim). ⁷ And when he taunted Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimea, David’s brother, struck him down. ⁸ These were descended from the giants (the Hebrew text again reads “from the Rapha” – the Rephaim) in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.

Groups on the Periphery

What about the other peoples mentioned in the lists of those populations to be displaced by the Israelites, namely the Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites? It is not certain that all these people were descended from the Nephilim, though it is suggested. Those people who were clearly Nephilim descendants were to be eliminated. Others who lived

among them who might not be direct descendants of the Nephilim would suffer the same fate since the chance of intermingling was high.

The Perizzites are mentioned a couple dozen times in the Old Testament, frequently in connection with the Rephaim. That they lived among the Rephaim, or were perhaps related to the Rephaim is evident by statements such as that in Joshua 17:15, “And Joshua said to them, “If you are a numerous people, go up by yourselves to the forest, and there clear ground for yourselves in the land of the Perizzites and the Rephaim, since the hill country of Ephraim is too narrow for you.” The Hivites are interesting due to the meaning of their name, which has the same consonants in Hebrew as another common name for “snake.” Unfortunately, the Old Testament doesn’t elaborate on them or their name so we don’t know if this is coincidental. If the inclusion of this people group in the list of other Nephilim descendants is more than coincidental, it is striking that the Hivites figure in several notorious points of Israelite history: the rap of Jacob’s daughter Dinah (Gen. 34:2) and the deception of Israel during the conquest (Josh. 9:1-7). The Jebusites are also intriguing because of their name, and the fact that they were the inhabitants of Jerusalem before David conquered the city for his capital. “Jebusite” literally means “those who trample.” It is interesting to speculate if this was a way to describe unusually large people, but it is speculation nonetheless. Finally, the word “Hittite” has two points of reference in the Old Testament. In most cases (and the wars of Joshua would follow this option) the word is very general, referring to the descendants of Heth, one of the sons of Canaan (Gen 10:15). Because of this lineage, they were related to the Jebusites, the Amorites, and the Hivites.

While it is not certain from these texts that these people also were unusually tall, it is suggested by Numbers 13, the famous passage of the report of the Israelites spies sent out by Moses to reconnoiter the land:

²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. ²⁶ And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹

The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan.” ³⁰ But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” ³¹ Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” ³² So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. ³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

In verse 32 the spies tell Moses that all the people they saw in the land were “of great height.” This could be a reference only to the sons of Anak in the following verse, but it could also be a comprehensive assessment. Amos 2:9-10, which we considered above, would support the latter. One thing that seems pretty certain is that those who were considered descendants of the Nephilim were targeted for destruction. You may still doubt the idea, as we’ve only discussed the names and passages describing these clans. The case is made even stronger when we consider the geographical areas put “under the ban” by Yahweh as Joshua embarked on the conquest of the Promised Land.

¹¹⁶ *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* ed. Robert Henry Charles; Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., (2004), 2:198.

¹¹⁷ See Joshua 13:30-31; Deut 1:4.

¹¹⁸ See “Rephaim” in K. van der Toorn et al., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible DDD*, (2nd extensively rev. ed.; Leiden; Boston; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999).

¹¹⁹ With regard to the wicked, see Numbers 16:30ff. For examples of the righteous going to Sheol, see Psa 88:1-7 (David).

¹²⁰ This is not to say there was no concept of Heaven in the Old Testament. Although the Old Testament concept of “glory” does not line up with the way modern preachers use that term, passages like Psalm 73:23-26 do speak of the righteous being in God’s presence and receiving reward. An excursus here on the Old Testament concept of the afterlife would be too distracting. It is sufficient to note that it appears from the Hebrew Bible that the Old Testament sees Sheol as the place where all the dead go *and remain*, the righteous awaiting a *future* time of being present with God. Bringing the New Testament into play, the Scripture suggests that the Old Testament righteous were not with the Lord until the resurrection of Christ. This would account for the “everyone is in Sheol” idea of the Old Testament. For our purposes, then, it is best to refer to Sheol as “the other side” or the “spirit world,” restricting our discussion to the Old Testament concept.

¹²¹ Many scholars hold that the term “Rephaim” refers to both the generic human dead (good or bad) and the spirits of the ancient giants. The basis for that position is that certain passages mentioning the Rephaim in connection with Sheol do not describe the Rephaim as kings or warriors—there is in fact little or no elaboration on the term. I am not persuaded that this is the right way to view the Rephaim of Sheol. One can just as well start with the specific passages that have the Rephaim as the spirits of the warrior kings of old and then contend that the passages that lack these details do not contradict the others. My own position is that all the Rephaim dead in Sheol are the spirits of the giant kings. In this regard I take Isaiah 26:19 as an exception, consider this reference a rhetorical device. Isaiah 26:14 and 26:19 both refer to the Rephaim, but the point appears to be wordplay for the resurrection to eternal life with Yahweh—the evil Rephaim (“mighty warriors”) will not rise again; “Yahweh’s Rephaim” (his loyal people—his “mighty warriors”) will. Additionally, that the spirits of dead humans are called Rephaim does not mean that there is no distinction between the departed “normal” human dead and the giant Rephaim dead. Ancient cultic and liturgical texts from a wide variety of literatures used single terms for different categories. Another biblical example would be the use of “elohim” for the departed spirit of Samuel (1 Sam. 28:13). In this sense, like Rephaim, the word “elohim” denotes “a being inhabiting the spiritual plane of reality.” Perhaps the word

“man” is illustrative. That word can be used to refer to all human beings, male or female, young or adult, but is also used to point more precisely to adult human males. The generic use does not invalidate the more precise use.

¹²² See DDD entry for “Bashan” for this point and what follows.

¹²³ See DDD for the entry “Malik.”

¹²⁴ See Josh 15:8; Neh 11:30. The place is also called “Valley of the Son of Hinnom” (Josh 15:8 [var.]; 18:16; 2 Chr 28:3; 33:6; Jer 7:31–32; 19:2, 6; 32:35).

¹²⁵ Josh 15:8; 18:16; 2 Sam 5:18–25 [1 Chr 14:8–16]; 2 Sam 23:13 [1 Chr 11:15].



Chapter 17

Devoted to Destruction

At the close of the last chapter I described the Nephilim descendants targeted for destruction in the conquest of the Land as being “put under the ban” by Yahweh. The phrase actually comes from a Hebrew term, *kherem*, translated variously in English versions as “cursed,” “devoted to destruction,” “devoted to Yahweh,” or “devoted to the ban.” The idea of *kherem* was that everything designated as put under *kherem* was to be treated as a sacrifice to Yahweh—to be utterly destroyed and burned. Leviticus 27:28-29 illustrates this idea: “But no devoted thing (*kherem*) that a man devotes (*kharam*, the verbal root) to the LORD, of anything that he has, whether man or beast, or of his inherited field, shall be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing (*kherem*) is most holy to the LORD. No one devoted (*kherem*), who is to be devoted for destruction (*kharam*) from mankind, shall be ransomed; he shall surely be put to death.”

The point is that nothing under *kherem* was to be kept—as Achan and his family sadly found out—for it was “devoted to Yahweh” as an offering. When the concept of *kherem* is connected to warfare, as in the case with Joshua’s wars of conquest, the result is the Old Testament’s version of holy war, where Yahweh would claim ownership of all life under *kherem* as a wage of war. In this chapter we’ll explore the *kherem* concept in the Old Testament as a further line of evidence that the conquest of the Promised Land is connected to Nephilim lineages.

It is important that the calls for holy war be viewed against the backdrop of what I’ve called the “Deuteronomy 32 worldview”—the disinheriting of the nations by Yahweh and the immediately subsequent creation of his own nation, Israel. After Babel, the biblical worldview has Yahweh’s “portion” opposed to the nations created in conjunction with the dispersion at Babel who were rejected by Yahweh and given over to other *elohim*. The picture that emerges is that the disinherited nations became enslaved to inferior, corrupt (Psalm 82) *elohim* by virtue of their worship of those gods and being cut off from the true God, the God of Israel. Israel, of course, was just a people after Babel, and soon wound up literally enslaved in Egypt. During the bondage in Egypt, the land promised by Yahweh to his “son” became occupied Nephilim descendants (Gen 6:4) and other peoples from the surrounding disinherited nations. The Land had to be cleared of both adversaries, but especially the remnant seed of the fallen sons of God whose presence was cast as an extension of the “seed” cursing (the seed of the *nachash*) and blessing (seed of the woman, Eve) in the wake of the Fall (Gen. 3). The holy war—the war for the seedline of the deliverer and the Land of Yahweh’s human family—had a cosmic thrust that was unmistakable to the ancients who read the account.

What’s In a Name?

The very word *kherem* is connected to the Genesis 6 incident and the Nephilim. The relationship would have been readily apparent to an Aramaic or Hebrew speaker. Recalling that Hebrew originally had no vowels, *kherem* is spelled with three Hebrew consonants, transliterated for our purposes as *kh-r-m*. The “kh” in our transliteration is actually transliterated in academic literature more accurately as an “h” with a dot under it—but the pronunciation is basically the “kh” sound. There is an ancient geographic place name with these exact same consonants—plus a final “n” consonant typically used in geographic place names: *kh-r-m-n*.¹²⁶ The place name *kh-r-m-n* is spelled “Hermon” in English—Mount Hermon, the mountain where, according to the intertestamental Jewish book of *1 Enoch*, the sons of God (the “Watchers”) descended from heaven and subsequently cohabited with human women. According to *1 Enoch*, the mountain got its name because the Watchers were cursed (*kharam*) for what they had done.¹²⁷

Not only is Mount Hermon associated with the events of Genesis 6:1-4 in the non-canonical book of *1 Enoch*, that association is also evident in the Old Testament—if you know where to look and what you’re looking at.

Mount Hermon is specifically described as the territory of one the giant clans discussed in the previous chapter: the Amorites. Deuteronomy 3:8-9 tells us, “So we took the land at that time out of the hand of the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, from the Valley of the Arnon to Mount Hermon”⁹ (the Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, while the Amorites call it Senir). ”

Mount Hermon was also associated with Baal worship and evil serpentine cults. The cult center Baal-Hermon is mentioned several times in the Old Testament (e.g., Judges 3:3; 1 Chron. 5:23). The former of these passages describes the nations that were to be driven out of the Land by Israel in a way that interests us here: “These are the nations: the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath” (see also Josh. 11:3). The proper noun “Hivite,” as you may recall from the last chapter, has the same consonants as a common Semitic word for “snake.” Further, Senir, the Amorite name for Mount Hermon (Deut. 3:8-9), was actually part of a mountainous region that included the infamous “place of the serpent” discussed in an earlier chapter, Bashan: “The members of the half-tribe of Manasseh lived in the land. They were very numerous from Bashan to Baal-hermon, Senir, and Mount Hermon” (1 Chron. 5:23).

Initial Failure

We read in earlier chapters about the failure of the Israelites to enter the Land when ten of the twelve spies sent out by Moses returned to the camp at Kadesh and reported that the Land was filled with the tall, powerful Anakim, descendants of the Nephilim. The ten spies convinced the people that the Anakim could not be defeated:

Numbers 13

²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. ²⁶ And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan.” ³⁰ But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” ³¹ Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” ³² So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. ³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

Deuteronomy 1:26-33 also records the report of the spies, and Yahweh challenged the Israelites to defeat the Anakim: “Do not be in dread or afraid of them. The LORD your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes” (Deut. 1:29-30). Israel refused to trust their God, and as a result of their lack of faith, the Amorites chased them away “like bees” (Deut. 1:44) and Yahweh sent the nation wandering in the desert until the unbelieving generation would die off. But the enemy remained, and would still need to be confronted.

Getting Back on the Horse

After nearly forty years of wandering, Yahweh brought the Israelites back *to the same location* of Kadesh (Numbers 20:1) where Israel had faltered. Moses requests passage through the country of Edom, whose inhabitants were related to the Israelites through Esau, Jacob’s brother, but the king of Edom refused (Num. 20:14-21). Moses’ brother Aaron died shortly thereafter, and Israel was attacked by the king of Arad, whose city was “devoted to destruction” in response (Num. 21:1-3).

Eventually, the people left Kadesh and proceeded along the border of Edom, coming to the land of Moab, which was under the control of the Amorites, a giant clan led by king Sihon. As he had done with Edom, Moses asked permission to pass through Moabite territory, but was again rebuffed (Num. 21:21-23). Moses had been told that Edom and Moab were not to be conquered, since that territory had been given to Abraham’s nephew, Lot. Amazingly, even before the wandering nation arrived at this point in their journey, Yahweh had providentially cleared the land of Nephilim descendants, not for the people directly descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the Israelites—but for more distant relatives of the divinely chosen patriarchs.¹²⁸ Apparently the separation between

anyone related to Yahweh's "portion," his elect people, was to be strictly enforced to cut off *any* route of lineage infection. In Deuteronomy 2 we read:

⁸ So we [the Israelites] went on, away from our brothers, the people of Esau, who live in Seir, away from the Arabah road from Elath and Ezion-geber. "And we turned and went in the direction of the wilderness of Moab." ⁹ And the LORD said to me, 'Do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the people of Lot for a possession.' ¹⁰ (The Emim formerly lived there, a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim. ¹¹ Like the Anakim they are also counted as Rephaim, but the Moabites call them Emim. ¹² The Horites also lived in Seir formerly, but the people of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place, as Israel did to the land of their possession, which the LORD gave to them.) ¹³ 'Now rise up and go over the brook Zered.' So we went over the brook Zered. ¹⁴ And the time from our leaving Kadesh-barnea until we crossed the brook Zered was thirty-eight years, until the entire generation, that is, the men of war, had perished from the camp, as the LORD had sworn to them. ¹⁵ For indeed the hand of the LORD was against them, to destroy them from the camp, until they had perished. ¹⁶ "So as soon as all the men of war had perished and were dead from among the people, ¹⁷ the LORD said to me, ¹⁸ 'Today you are to cross the border of Moab at Ar. ¹⁹ And when you approach the territory of the people of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession.' ²⁰ (It is also counted as a land of Rephaim. Rephaim formerly lived there—but the Ammonites call them Zamzummim— ²¹ a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim; but the LORD destroyed them before the Ammonites, and they dispossessed them and settled in their place.

Like Edom and Moab, Israel was not to harass the Ammonites, for their land had been granted to Lot and his descendants. There was one problem, though. While certain of the Nephilim descendants had already been driven out, more had moved in—the Amorites—and now blocked the way through Ammonite territory. Numbers 21:21-23 describes the situation:

Numbers 21

²¹ Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, ²² "Let me pass through your land. We will not turn aside into field or vineyard. We will not drink the water of a well. We will go by the King's Highway until we have passed through your territory." ²³ But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. He gathered all his people together and went out against Israel to the wilderness and came to Jahaz and fought against Israel.

God's response and the ensuing rout of the enemy under Moses is given in both Numbers 21:21-23 and Deuteronomy 2:24-25:

Numbers 21

And Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as to the Ammonites, for the border of the Ammonites was strong.²⁵ And Israel took all these cities, and Israel settled in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all its villages.²⁶ For Heshbon was the city of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and taken all his land out of his hand, as far as the Arnon.

Deuteronomy 2

²⁴ ‘Rise up, set out on your journey and go over the Valley of the Arnon. Behold, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land. Begin to take possession, and contend with him in battle. ²⁵ This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you.’

Moses apparently asked for safe passage through Moab (Num. 21:21-22), since the territory had been given to Lot. He may not have known that the Amorites were there, a people whom Yahweh had said must be eliminated, and who were of unusual height (“Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong as the oaks; I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath”). A better answer is that God used this occasion to harden the heart of the Amorite king before punishing him, as he had done with Pharaoh earlier. God had told Abraham that the bondage in Egypt would serve to build up God’s wrath against the Amorites (Gen. 15:16 – “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete”). Well, it was complete now. Judgment day had come.

The annihilation of Sihon, king of the Amorite giant clan is chronicled in Numbers 21:23-26:

²³ But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. He gathered all his people together and went out against Israel to the wilderness and came to Jahaz and fought against Israel. ²⁴ And Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as to the Ammonites, for the border of the Ammonites was strong. ²⁵ And Israel took all these cities, and Israel settled in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all its villages. ²⁶ For Heshbon was the city of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and taken all his land out of his hand, as far as the Arnon.

Sihon’s ally, Og of Bashan, was next. This territory was not part of Lot’s inheritance. After the defeat of Sihon, Og of Bashan attacked the Israelites and came to the same end. The incident is chronicled in Numbers 21:31-35 and Deuteronomy 3:

Numbers 21

³¹ Thus Israel lived in the land of the Amorites. ³² And Moses sent to spy out Jazer, and they captured its villages and dispossessed the Amorites who were there. ³³ Then they turned and went up by the way to Bashan. And Og the king of Bashan came out against them, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. ³⁴ But the LORD said to Moses, “Do not fear him, for I have given him into your hand, and all his people, and his land. And you shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon.” ³⁵ So they defeated him and his sons and all his people, until he had no survivor left. And they possessed his land.

Deuteronomy 3

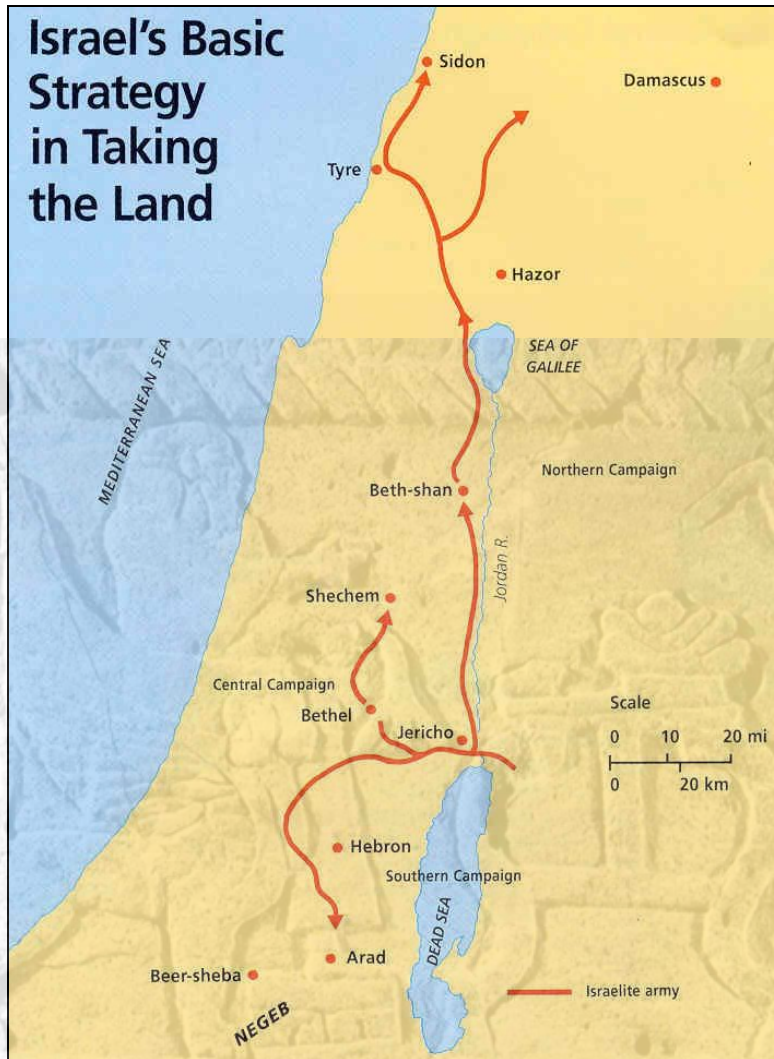
¹ “Then we turned and went up the way to Bashan. And Og the king of Bashan came out against us, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. ² But the LORD said to me, ‘Do not fear him, for I have given him and all his people and his land into your hand. And you shall do to him as you did to Sihon the king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon.’ ³ So the LORD our God gave into our hand Og also, the king of Bashan, and all his people, and we struck him down until he had no survivor left. ⁴ And we took all his cities at that time—there was not a city that we did not take from them—sixty cities, the whole region of Argob, the kingdom of Og in Bashan. ⁵ All these were cities fortified with high walls, gates, and bars, besides very many unwallled villages. ⁶ And we devoted them to destruction, as we did to Sihon the king of Heshbon, devoting to destruction every city, men, women, and children. ⁷ But all the livestock and the spoil of the cities we took as our plunder. ⁸ So we took the land at that time out of the hand of the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, from the Valley of the Arnon to Mount Hermon ⁹ (the Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, while the Amorites call it Senir), ¹⁰ all the cities of the tableland and all Gilead and all Bashan, as far as Salecah and Edrei, cities of the kingdom of Og in Bashan. ¹¹ (For only Og the king of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. Behold, his bed was a bed of iron. Is it not in Rabbah of the Ammonites? Nine cubits was its length, and four cubits its breadth, according to the common cubit.)

The focus could not be clearer. Before Moses and the Israelites ever even set foot in the Promised Land, the area on the other side of Jordan, the “Transjordan,” had to be cleared of the Nephilim bloodlines. The idea of the “seed of the nachash” is also in view here since, as noted in the last chapter, Bashan and the cities of Ashtaroht and Edrei, mentioned several times in these passages, were considered “the place of the serpent” and the gateway to the abode of the infernal deified Rephaim spirits. This demonic geography had to be redeemed—brought back into Yahweh’s kingdom. And once several of Israel’s tribes settled in these Transjordanian regions, it was.¹²⁹



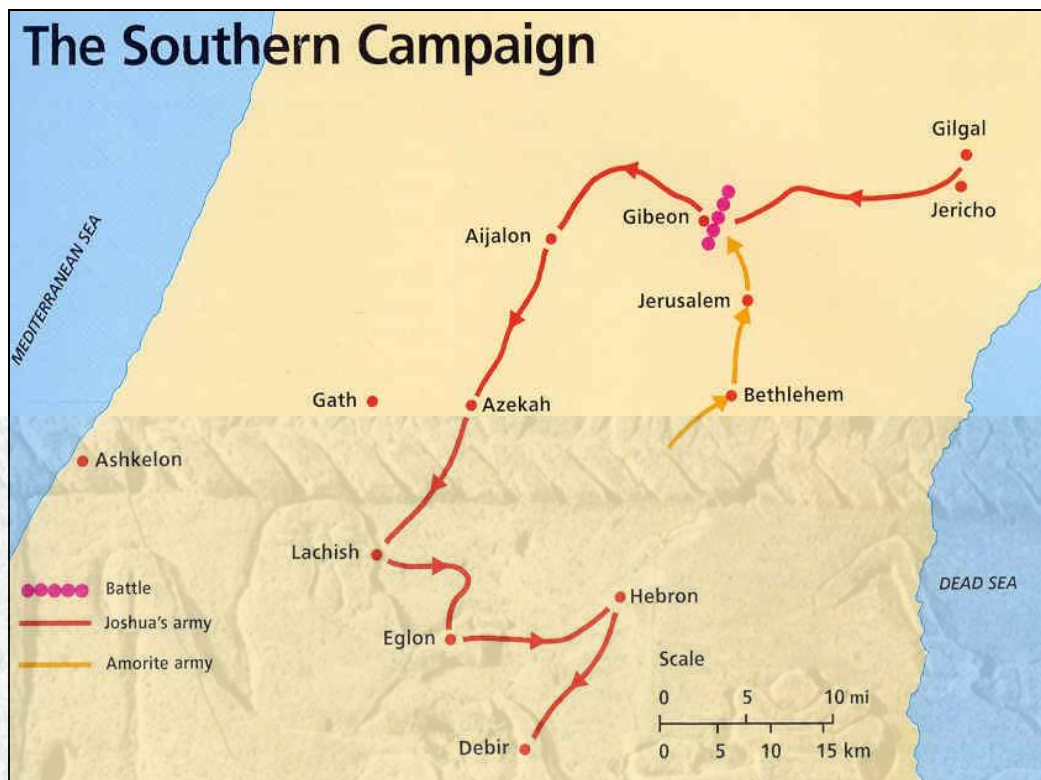
The Wars of Joshua

Most readers will recall that soon after these victories, Moses died, without every having stepped into the Promised Land. Some geographical orientation will be helpful as we walk through Joshua's conquest:



A few observations are in order. The Transjordan having been conquered, God directs Joshua to enter the Promised Land at its center, at Jericho. A central military campaign would have the immediate effect of separating the cities of the north and south regions—divide and conquer. This is precisely the way Joshua took the land, and the agenda was apparently the same.

Joshua's first goal was Jericho, which was "devoted to destruction" after the familiar episode with Rahab the prostitute and the seven days of encircling the city (Josh. 2:15-25). He then moved to Ai, where failure to devote everything in the city to destruction on the part of Achan resulted in an Israelite defeat (Josh. 7:1-5). After the sin was dealt with, Ai was totally destroyed, "devoted to destruction," in a subsequent battle (Josh. 8). Joshua then moved south into what was known as the hill country, as the map below illustrates:

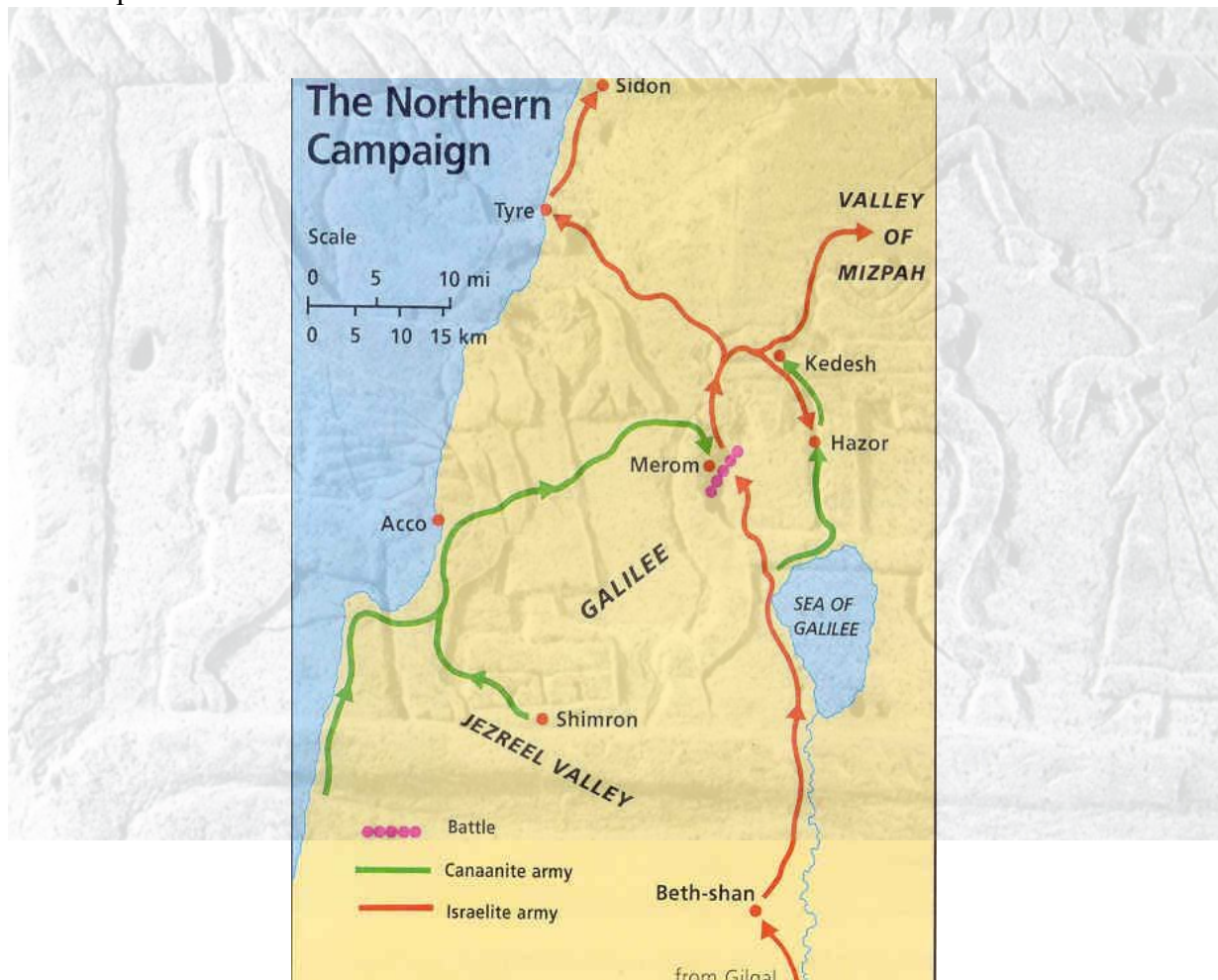


The southern campaign is described in Joshua 10. Part of that chapter reads as follows, and the *kherem* concept is clear:

²⁹ Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Makkedah to Libnah and fought against Libnah. ³⁰ And the LORD gave it also and its king into the hand of Israel. And he struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it; he left none remaining in it. And he did to its king as he had done to the king of Jericho. ³¹ Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Libnah to Lachish and laid siege to it and fought against it. ³² And the LORD gave Lachish into the hand of Israel, and he captured it on the second day and struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it, as he had done to Libnah. ³³ Then Horam king of Gezer came up to help Lachish. And Joshua struck him and his people, until he left none remaining. ³⁴ Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Lachish to Eglon. And they laid siege to it and fought against it. ³⁵ And they captured it on that day, and struck it with the edge of the sword. And he devoted every person in it to destruction that day, as he had done to Lachish. ³⁶ Then Joshua and all Israel with him went up from Eglon to Hebron. And they fought against it ³⁷ and captured it and struck it with the edge of the sword, and its king and its towns, and every person in it. He left none remaining, as he had done to Eglon, and devoted it to destruction and every person in it. ³⁸ Then Joshua and all Israel with him turned back to Debir and fought against it ³⁹ and he captured it with its king and all its towns. And they struck them with the edge of the sword and devoted to destruction every person in it; he left none remaining. Just as he

had done to Hebron and to Libnah and its king, so he did to Debir and to its king.
⁴⁰ So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the LORD God of Israel commanded. ⁴¹ And Joshua struck them from Kadesh-barnea as far as Gaza, and all the country of Goshen, as far as Gibeon. ⁴² And Joshua captured all these kings and their land at one time, because the LORD God of Israel fought for Israel. ⁴³ Then Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, to the camp at Gilgal.

After the invasion of the southern hill country, Joshua went north and carried out the same plan:



Joshua 11

When Jabin, king of Hazor, heard of this, he sent to Jobab king of Madon, and to the king of Shimron, and to the king of Achshaph, ² and to the kings who were in the northern hill country, and in the Arabah south of Chinneroth, and in the lowland, and in Naphtoth-dor on the west, ³ to the Canaanites in the east and the

west, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, and the Jebusites in the hill country, and the Hivites under Hermon in the land of Mizpah. ⁴ And they came out with all their troops, a great horde, in number like the sand that is on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots. ⁵ And all these kings joined their forces and came and encamped together at the waters of Merom to fight with Israel. ⁶ And the LORD said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will give over all of them, slain, to Israel. You shall hamstring their horses and burn their chariots with fire.” ⁷ So Joshua and all his warriors came suddenly against them by the waters of Merom and fell upon them. ⁸ And the LORD gave them into the hand of Israel, who struck them and chased them as far as Great Sidon and Misrephoth-maim, and eastward as far as the Valley of Mizpeh. And they struck them until he left none remaining. ⁹ And Joshua did to them just as the LORD said to him: he hamstrung their horses and burned their chariots with fire. ¹⁰ And Joshua turned back at that time and captured Hazor and struck its king with the sword, for Hazor formerly was the head of all those kingdoms. ¹¹ And they struck with the sword all who were in it, devoting them to destruction; there was none left that breathed. And he burned Hazor with fire. ¹² And all the cities of those kings, and all their kings, Joshua captured, and struck them with the edge of the sword, devoting them to destruction, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded. ¹³ But none of the cities that stood on mounds did Israel burn, except Hazor alone; that Joshua burned. ¹⁴ And all the spoil of these cities and the livestock, the people of Israel took for their plunder. But every man they struck with the edge of the sword until they had destroyed them, and they did not leave any who breathed. ¹⁵ Just as the LORD had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did. He left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses.

The destruction seems wanton, but who was Joshua after in the campaign through the hill country? The answer comes in Joshua 11:21-23.

²¹ And Joshua came at that time and cut off the Anakim from the hill country, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from all the hill country of Judah, and from all the hill country of Israel. Joshua devoted them to destruction with their cities. ²² There was none of the Anakim left in the land of the people of Israel. Only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod did some remain. ²³ So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses. And Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war.

The wording of this passage is interesting. The passage specifically wants the reader to know that all these campaigns resulted in wiping out all the descendants of the Anakim giants, who were in turn descendants of the Nephilim according to Numbers 13:33. As if this were not enough to draw the reader’s attention to the Nephilim bloodlines, the writer adds, “Only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod” did some of the Anakim remain. Why add that note? Because those cities were cities of the Philistines who also had such bloodlines (Rephaim) in their midst, as the lineage of Goliath “the Gittite” (i.e., “from Gath”) tells us very plainly, along with several other passages.¹³⁰ The territory controlled by the

Philistines was part of the Promised Land and was therefore to be conquered as well, but Joshua grew old before those sites could be taken (Josh. 13:1-7). It is also interesting that the Hivites and Mount Hermon are again mentioned.

All of this evidence points to the idea that, while specific regions and people groups are listed in various passages to be devoted to destruction, the real target were the Nephilim bloodlines. At times these individuals were concentrated in specific cities and areas; at others they were mingled with other peoples. But whenever editorial details about who was being targeted are offered, the details note a blood relationship to the Nephilim or the unusual height of the people devoted to destruction. It is difficult to see this as coincidental, especially in light of the cosmic narrative that precedes—and follows.

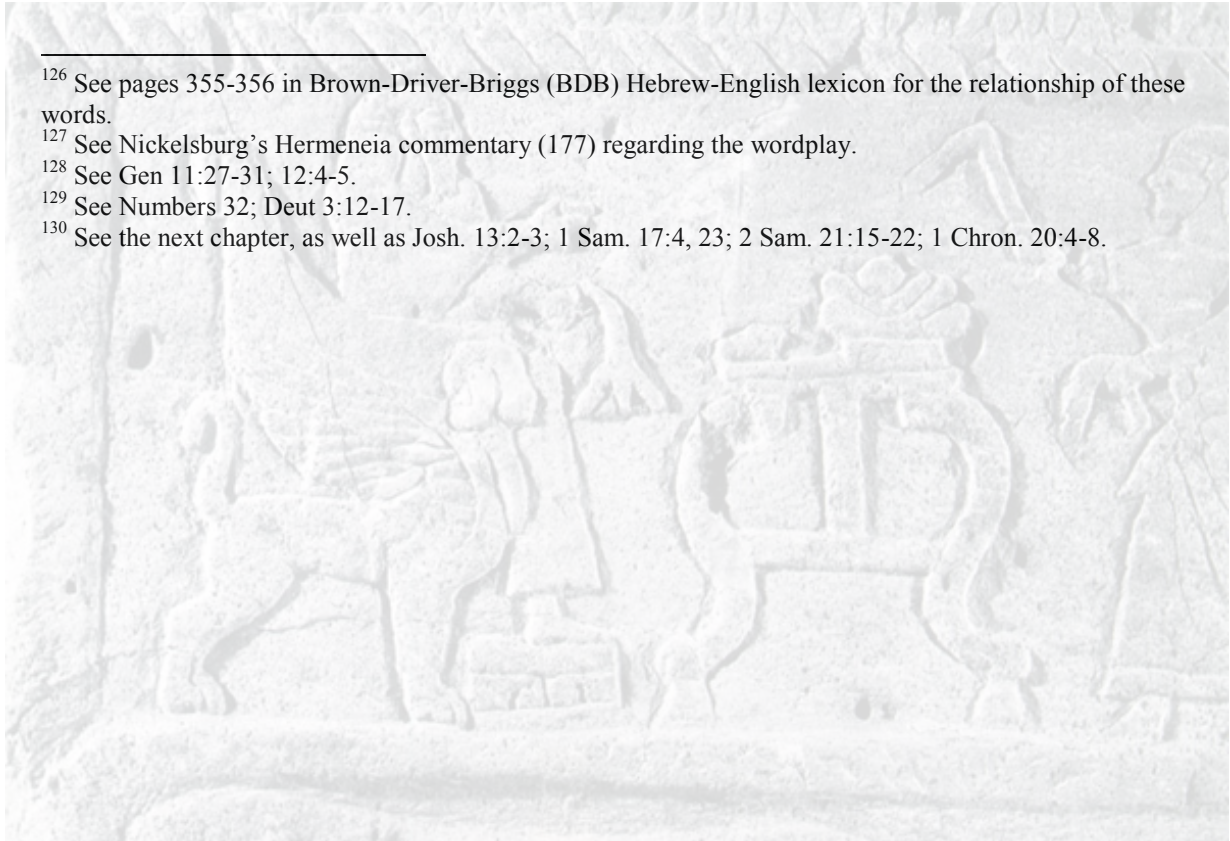
¹²⁶ See pages 355-356 in Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB) Hebrew-English lexicon for the relationship of these words.

¹²⁷ See Nickelsburg's Hermeneia commentary (177) regarding the wordplay.

¹²⁸ See Gen 11:27-31; 12:4-5.

¹²⁹ See Numbers 32; Deut 3:12-17.

¹³⁰ See the next chapter, as well as Josh. 13:2-3; 1 Sam. 17:4, 23; 2 Sam. 21:15-22; 1 Chron. 20:4-8.



Chapter 18

Divine Kingship

During the chaotic period that followed Joshua's death described in the book of Judges, there was no single ruler of Israel. Israel had been abandoned by the visible Yahweh, who had physically led them for 40 years after the escape from Pharaoh, for refusing to drive out the *nachash*-seed from the Land. This judgment was rendered at a place called Bochim, which means "weeping," and is recorded in Judges 2:1-5.

Now the Angel of Yahweh went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you,'² and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?"³ So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you."⁴ As soon as the angel of Yahweh spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept.⁵ And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD.

In effect, Israel learned what it would be like to not have Yahweh's presence or a divinely-appointed human leader with them during this period. They were overrun by their enemies among the disinherited nations and enslaved. Yahweh periodically raised up localized heroes ("judges") as military deliverers so Israel was not wiped out, but it was a bad situation. It wasn't until the WORD of Yahweh decided to return in the days of Samuel that things changed (see Chapter 9). Samuel was the last judge, but was also a prophet, priest, and Yahweh's chosen king-anointer.

The Seeds of Kingship

Our view of kingship in Israel is in fact often filtered through Samuel. I've argued that having a divinely appointed human co-ruler (a king) was something Yahweh decided to do in part of the goal of restoring his Edenic kingdom. But in 1 Samuel 8 when the people demand that the elderly Samuel appoint a king in his place as his own death approaches, Samuel—and God as well—clearly don't like the idea. How do we understand this? The fact is that we have simply misread 1 Samuel 8 and Samuel's reaction. The tension is resolved in the biblical text. The problem was not the request for a king, but in the motive behind the request. The issue is what kind of king was appropriate, not whether Israel should have a king or not.

Scripture is quite clear that God intended Israel to have kings. It is significant that from the beginning of God's call of Abraham, his reconstitution of an earthly family that would result in a return to the Edenic notion of a divine-human council on earth under Yahweh, the promise of kings was given to the patriarchs. The biblical text includes several specific instances where God included kings in the promises and blessings for Abraham and his family. The passages below are all set before the demand for a king by the people in Samuel's day:

Genesis 17:1-8, 15-16

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God" . . . ¹⁵ And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Genesis 35:9-12

⁹ God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. ¹⁰ And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. ¹¹ And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. ¹² The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you."

Genesis 49:10

¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Numbers 24:5-7

⁵ How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! ⁶ Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the LORD has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters. ⁷ Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters; his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted.¹³¹

Deuteronomy 17:14-20

¹⁴ “When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,’ ¹⁵ you may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. ¹⁶ Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never return that way again.’ ¹⁷ And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold. ¹⁸ “And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, ²⁰ that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

Kingship was clearly in the picture before the time of Samuel. The last passage, Deut. 17:14-20, lays out rules for the kind of king that Israel should have. So what was the problem in 1 Samuel 8 with respect to both Samuel’s and God’s response to the demand of the people? Notice the objection in 1 Samuel 8:19-20: “But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” The issue was that, contrary to God’s promise that he would fight their battles and protect Israel in the Land he had promised, Israel couldn’t stand the fact that they had no human military deliverer. They couldn’t handle the idea that when a foreign power threatened them, they had no commander-in-chief- but their God. They also appear to have rejected the elders placed over them in Moses’ day as a national administration. The biblical idea of a king was one who would be the chief agent of Yahweh in living out the law of God (see below on the *edut*), upholding Yahweh’s covenants, and judging righteously. When threatened, the king would ask Yahweh for deliverance and not trust in his own army or help from foreign armies. This is why Deut. 17:14-20 forbids multiplying horses (for a cavalry), wives (creating foreign alliances with the disinherited nations), and wealth (to pay mercenaries or tribute to foreign kings). That’s what all the other kings of the earth did—and that’s the kind of king the people wanted from Samuel.

God’s King, God’s Son

Readers are probably familiar with certain passages in the Old Testament that state that the king of Israel was the son of God. These passages are commonly cited in discussions of the concept of the Messiah, but little is said beyond that connection. While the Messiah is certainly the ultimate king of Israel, these passages affirm the idea that the kings of Israel (those from David's line) were also viewed as sons of God. Below are the major texts in this regard.

2 Samuel 7:10-17

¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.' ” ¹⁷ In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

Psalm 2:

- ¹ Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
- ² The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
- ³ “Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”
- ⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
- ⁵ Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
- ⁶ “As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”
- ⁷ I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
- ⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
- ⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.”
- ¹⁰ Now therefore, O kings, be wise;

- be warned, O rulers of the earth.
11 Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
12 Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 45

- 1 My heart overflows with a pleasing theme;
I address my verses to the king;
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.
2 You are the most handsome of the sons of men;
grace is poured upon your lips;
therefore God has blessed you forever.
3 Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,
in your splendor and majesty!
4 In your majesty ride out victoriously
for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness;
let your right hand teach you awesome deeds!
5 Your arrows are sharp
in the heart of the king's enemies;
the peoples fall under you.
6 Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.
The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;
7 you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;

Psalm 89:19-29

- 19 Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly one, and said:
"I have granted help to one who is mighty;
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
20 I have found David, my servant;
with my holy oil I have anointed him,
21 so that my hand shall be established with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.
22 The enemy shall not outwit him;
the wicked shall not humble him.
23 I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
24 My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him,
and in my name shall his horn be exalted.
25 I will set his hand on the sea

- and his right hand on the rivers.
- 26 He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation.’
- 27 And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
- 28 My steadfast love I will keep for him forever,
and my covenant will stand firm for him.
- 29 I will establish his offspring forever
and his throne as the days of the heavens.

This sort of divine sonship language used of human beings isn’t unique. We saw much earlier that Israel as a nation was corporately referred to as the son of Yahweh. Moses boldly told Pharaoh that Yahweh demanded, “Let my son go that he may serve me” (Exod. 4:23). Hosea’s famous statement is no doubt more familiar: “When Israel was a child, I loved him; and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1). Elsewhere Hosea expresses the same idea, “Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God’” (Hosea 1:10).

The point in all these cases is not that every Israelite was deity incarnated, but that Yahweh considered these humans to be his own children—adopting them as it were.¹³² The king of Israel was a special case, though. While Yahweh has many human children, only the king—specifically David—is referred to as the “firstborn” according to Psalm 89 (v. 27). Although many take this term to denote chronological origin in their effort to deny the eternality of Jesus, to whom these divine kingship and divine Sonship passages are applied by New Testament writers, it is clear that origin or chronology is not in view. David was not the chronological firstborn in his own family, nor was he the first king. The term refers to *status*—specifically, it designates the inheritance of the kingly office and David’s position as the starting point for a dynasty.

Divine Council Connections

There are other intriguing details about the king to be found in these and other texts, several of which link his office to divine council terms we’ve seen before. Psalm 89:27 has God declaring “I will make him [David] the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.” The word “highest” in this verse is *elyon*, (“Most High”) the term used of God in several places, including Psalm 82:6, perhaps the most explicit divine council passage in the Old Testament. The fact that this title, *elyon*, is attributed to the Israelite king is significant. Note that the king is *elyon* on the earth, over the rulers of the disinherited nations.¹³³ Just as both the invisible and visible Yahwehs are superior to and have ultimate rule over the sons of God who have power over the disinherited nations, so the human co-ruler son of God has authority over those nations under Yahweh’s sovereignty.

The human king is, in fact, the human counterpart to the visible Yahweh. While Yahweh appeared as a human being in the Old Testament, the king of Israel was a human being

with divine status. Both of these elements of course are merged in the incarnation of Jesus, the ultimate visible manifestation of Yahweh and the king of Israel, and the ultimate co-ruler and imager of God.¹³⁴

In Psalm 2:8 we read that Yahweh will make the disinherited nations the inheritance (“heritage”) of the Israelite king (“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession”). Thus this Israelite king, who, as a human being was created “a little lower than the *elohim*” (Psa. 8:5) is destined to rule the nations allotted to the lesser *elohim* who received them at the judgment of the tower of Babel described in Deut. 32:8-9. As we’ll see in subsequent chapters, both of these themes recur in the New Testament with respect to all believers—those who follow Christ will “rule over angels” (1 Cor. 6:3) having been adopted into God’s family. They are “set over the nations” at the time of the end (Rev. 2:26).

Returning briefly to Psalm 89, it is fascinating to note that this dominion of the Israelite, Davidic king is ratified and guaranteed by the divine council—specifically one member. We saw above in 2 Samuel 7 that Yahweh made a covenant promise with David that the rightful kings of Israel would only come through David’s dynastic family line. Only a son of David could rightfully claim to be divinely-ordained to sit on the throne of Israel. Psalm 89 reiterates this covenant in detail. In Psalm 89:35-37, after all the terms of Yahweh’s covenant with David have been spelled out again we read:

35 "Once I have sworn by my Holy One;
I will not lie to David.
36 "His descendants shall be forever
And his throne as the sun before me.
37 "It shall be established forever like the moon,
And the witness in the clouds will be faithful."

The key to understanding this small section of Psalm 89 are the two underlined portions. Notice how the passage has certain parallel elements, which I've marked by letters and indenting:

A I have sworn by my Holy One;

B I will not lie to David.

C "His descendants shall be forever

C his throne (shall be) as the sun before me.

C "It [his throne] shall be established forever like the moon,

A And a witness in the clouds will be faithful."

Translations disagree on the underlined portions.¹³⁵ Many have "by my holiness" for the first underline, but that makes little sense in light of the literary parallelism. It seems that Yahweh has sworn by a person (a witness) in the second underlining, which calls for *a person* being "sworn by" in the first underlining. All that is needed to arrive at "my Holy One" is to change the vowel marks in the Hebrew at this point to conform it to "Holy One," a description found elsewhere in the Old Testament.

What we have here is Yahweh swearing a covenantal oath to David and guaranteeing that oath by some witness in the clouds. In the ancient Near East, this language was quite common. It is not hard to find treaties and covenants between two human parties or between a human party and a god that have other gods (at times even described as members of a pagan religion's version of a divine council) witnessing to or guaranteeing the terms of the covenant.

At first glance, you might wonder how this could work in Israel's faith. The idea that a covenant Yahweh made would be "backed up" some other heavenly being sounds odd, since it seems to suggest that Yahweh might not be able to fulfill the covenant or might not want to at some point—like he needs his feet held to the fire. After all, in Hebrews 6:13-20 we are told in no uncertain terms that since Yahweh could swear by no one greater in his promises to Abraham, he swore by himself in those covenant promises. That should settle it, or so we would think. But then there's Psalm 89.

If you give it some thought, it should be apparent as to who the second guarantor of Yahweh's covenant is. The logical choice is the one we've seen again and again in our journey through the Old Testament—the second Yahweh. It's getting a little ahead of ourselves to point out how the New Testament handles Psalm 89:35-37, but it's worth throwing in a spoiler or two. The New Testament tells us plainly that the "faithful witness" in the clouds is the incarnated second Yahweh, Jesus. This would make perfect sense since it is Jesus, the ultimate descendant of David who merges deity and humanity into the office of the King of Israel—and all the other nations as Psalm 89:27 shows us—into one person. In Revelation 1:4 we read:

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

For one final divine council connection with Israelite kingship, you may recall from our the brief discussion several chapters ago about the Mosaic Law that Israel was at times called the *adat Israel*, “the assembly of Israel.” The word *adat* in that phrase is the same word for the divine “council” in Psalm 82. The Law dispensed in the presence of the divine *adat* at Sinai is often called the *edut* – same consonants but different vowels, since both words come from the same basic root in Hebrew.¹³⁶ Since the tablets of the Law handed to Moses by the visible Yahweh on Sinai were at first kept in the Tent of Meeting and then the Tabernacle, inside the ark of the covenant, all these items also came to be referred to as the *edut*.¹³⁷ There was therefore a verbal and mental connection established between Yahweh and the divine council on Sinai and these things. With this review as backdrop, notice the description of the coronation of King Joash in 2 Kings 11:9-12. The wording of my translation below is a bit awkward, but I have deliberately literalized the text to draw attention to the word *edut*:

Then he brought out the king’s son and put on him the crown (*nezer*) and the testimony (*edut*). And they installed him as king and anointed him, and they clapped the hands and said, “May the king live!”

Most English translations have something like the ESV (“Then he brought out the king’s son and put the crown on him and gave him the testimony. And they proclaimed him king and anointed him, and they clapped their hands and said, “Long live the king!”). Such a wording makes it sound as though the *edut* was given to the king (“gave him the *edut*”), but the words “gave him” do not exist in the Hebrew text. The verb translated “put on” refers to both the *nezer* (“crown”) and the *edut* (they are both direct objects of that verb). This means that, like the crown, the *edut* was something *worn by the king*.

Scholars have disputed what this object was. *Nezer* (“crown”) is the same word used of the headdress worn by the high priest (Lev. 8:9). That *nezer* had a gold plate with an inscription on it that read “holy to Yahweh” (Exod. 39:30). This mixture of *nezer* plus written inscription has led scholars to speculate that the *edut* may have been a plaque with an inscription. My own view is that, since the *edut* was a term for the tablets of the law, the *edut* worn by the king may have been a scapula or pendant worn by the king in the shape of the tablets or inscribed with the Ten Commandments. The speculation isn’t important, though. What is more significant is the identification of the king, the earthly son of God and the one set over the fallen sons of God and their nations, is identified with the Law delivered by the visible Yahweh and the divine council at Sinai. The king is the chief bearer, enforcer, and lover of the Law, and is effectively the chief human liaison between Yahweh and the divine council. Once again, all these ideas are found in descriptions of Jesus in the New Testament.

As we look back on the last two chapters, we can see the interrelationships between the invisible Yahweh, the visible Yahweh, the idea of the divine status of Israel's human king, the divine council, the 70 elders, and the corporate children of Yahweh. But less than a century after David took the throne, Israel plunged itself into worshipping idols and rejecting the God who had created them and redeemed them from Egypt. The gods of the nations would have their way.



¹³¹ The reference to Agag is to king Agag the Amalekite, whom Samuel killed after Saul refused to do so (1 Sam. 15). This indicates that this passage, though in the Pentateuch, was written after the time of Moses. That said, it is placed in the text prior to the request for a king.

¹³² This is the backdrop to the New Testament idea of the believer's adoption as sons and daughters of God. See Chapter 25.

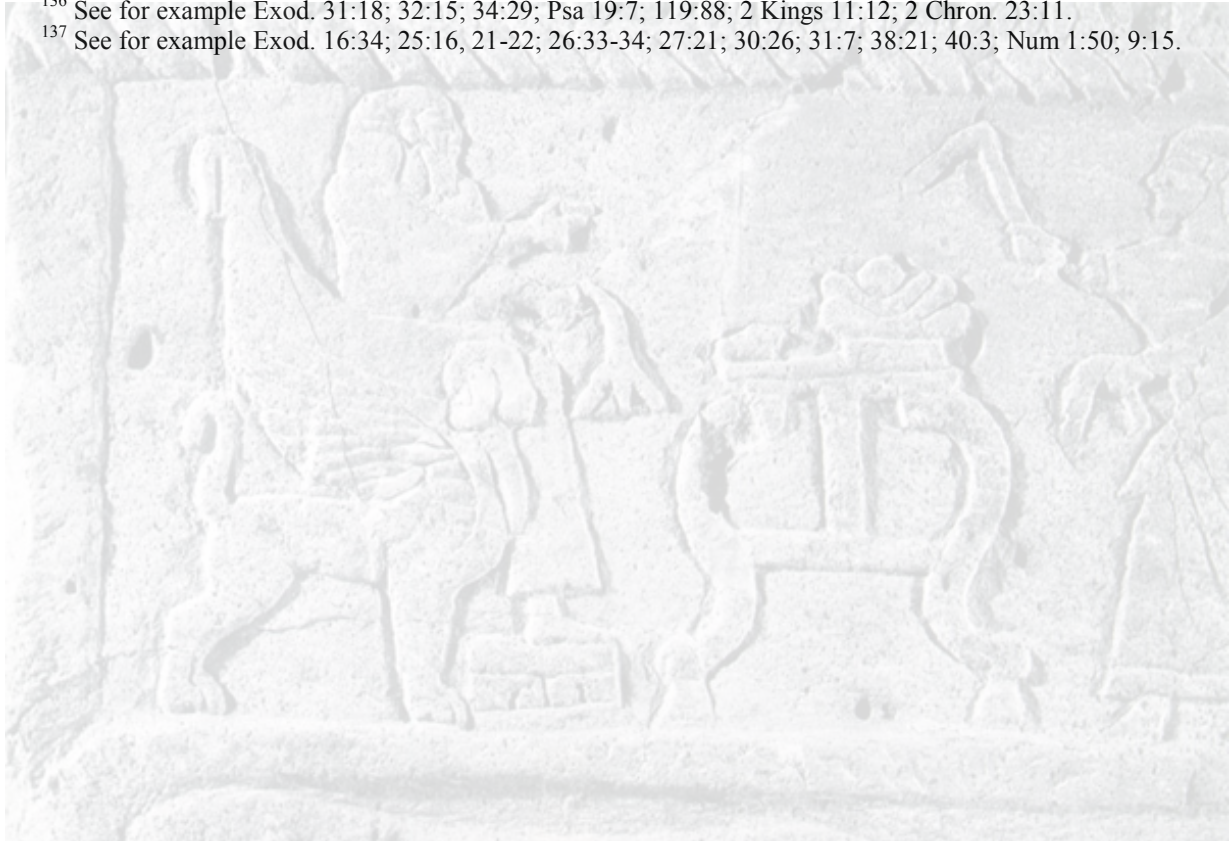
¹³³ Psalm 89 actually follows the order of a divine council scene in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle. Following the parallels is quite instructive, since the deity co-ruler under the high God at Ugarit is paralleled by Yahweh's visual divine co-regent AND the human Israelite king.

¹³⁴ See Chapter 21 for a fuller exposition of how these kingship themes are tied to Jesus in the New Testament.

¹³⁵ English translations disagree at these points in this passage for very technical reasons. See the detailed discussion of the issues in this passage at www.themyththatistrue.com.

¹³⁶ See for example Exod. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29; Psa 19:7; 119:88; 2 Kings 11:12; 2 Chron. 23:11.

¹³⁷ See for example Exod. 16:34; 25:16, 21-22; 26:33-34; 27:21; 30:26; 31:7; 38:21; 40:3; Num 1:50; 9:15.



Chapter 19

Standing in the Council

At the close of the last chapter, we left the Israelites on the cusp of conquering the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses and Joshua. Before we get into Israel's glory days under David and Solomon, we need to pause for a moment to explore a very important theme in the Old Testament's cosmic narrative: the initiation and validation of human beings for divine service. You may not realize it, but there is a distinct pattern to Yahweh's sovereign choice of human leaders, a pattern that includes the divine council.

To discern the full implications of this pattern, it is vital to first understand what is meant by the term "prophet." Prophets are often thought of as people who, with God's assistance, foretold the future. Forecasting future events was actually a very small part of what prophetic figures did and what they were about. To speak prophetically in the full-blown biblical sense meant simply to be a spokesperson for God—to be God's mouthpiece to his people and to the enemies of his people. At times that involved functioning as a divine oracle and foretelling the future. Most of the time, though, it meant speaking judgment and motivating the people of God to live the way God wanted them to live. Additionally, it should also be noted that prophets served as examples of godliness to their people. Prophets were people of exceptional righteousness and held to very high standards of accountability by God.

We tend to think of prophets as coming along in the biblical story after the days of the judges, who were temporary military and spiritual leaders prior to the time when Israel had kings. The last of the judges was Samuel, but Samuel also served as a priest and was called by God to be a prophet (1 Sam. 3:20). Since Samuel is a transitional figure from the time of the judges to the establishment of the first king in Israel, Samuel is thought of as the first prophet. This isn't actually the case. Prophets go all the way back to the beginning.

Jesus affirmed as much when he accused the Pharisees of spilling the blood of all the prophets sent by God to his people, beginning with Abel, the righteous son of Adam (Luke 11:49-51). Adam, of course, was the initial imager of God, and Abel stood in the stead of his father as one who walked with God, imaging his Maker on earth. Cain killed Abel, and Abel was replaced by Seth, whom we are told was in the "likeness" and "image" of his father, Adam. That terminology comes from Genesis 1:26, and it isn't coincidental. All humans are divine imagers, but in our fallen condition we often don't image God as we are able and as he intended. We need divine intervention or divinely appointed leadership to keep us on track, to keep us from wanting to be as God on our own terms. God has always chosen righteous leaders for that purpose—to speak prophetically about doing God's will, denouncing sin, and impede us from following other lesser gods who promise to give us what only the true God can give us.

All of the figures we've talked about to this point—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and Samuel—should therefore be thought of as prophets, spokesmen for God. They didn't just stumble into the job, either. They all had something specific in common that marked them out as prophets—a direct encounter with the visible Yahweh and members of the divine council. Let's go back to Eden where the threads of this divine job interview begin.

The First Prophet

We saw in Chapter Three that Eden was considered the dwelling place of Yahweh, and that human beings were originally intended to be part of the divine council on earth. To see where Yahweh is or “lives” is to find oneself in his throne room, and throne room scenes in the Old Testament include Yahweh's council. Eden was where Yahweh held court, the place from which Yahweh ruled. We readily recall that it was in the garden where Yahweh decreed that humankind would be created as his imagers, but what may not be as obvious is that Adam met with the divine council in conjunction with his own role as a mediating, prophetic human figure on earth. We learn this from Job 15:7-8, where we hear Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, ask Job, “Are you the first man who was born? Or were you brought forth before the hills? Have you listened in the council of God? Have you restricted wisdom to yourself?”

The questions are obviously rhetorical. They each anticipate “no” for an answer by using contrast. Of course Job was not the first man—Adam was. Job had not listened in the council of God (Hebrew, *sod elohah*)—but the rhetorical contrast implies that Adam *had* listened in the council of God. This would make sense given that Adam lived in Eden, the meeting place of the council, and that it had been God's intent for human beings to be his earthly children and human members of his council. We saw how all this came to a screeching halt in Chapter 4, when the *nachash*, a member of the council, caused Adam and Eve to sin, resulting in their expulsion from the place of council.

There are other clues in Genesis and elsewhere that Adam regularly experienced the presence of God and his council. Adam lived in Eden, and Eden was where God and his council were, moment by moment. We read in Genesis 3:8 that Adam and Eve could hear “the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” This “walking” terminology can be construed two ways, both of which are valid in my judgment. Spirits don't “walk.” Given all the evidence we've already seen for how Yahweh appeared as a human to have direct contact with humans, this could be a very early instance of the second Yahweh—the Yahweh in human form—being directly present with Adam and Eve. Another possibility is that this language is figurative and speaks of the presence of God more generally. If this were the case, it would be akin to Adam and Eve being able to hear or experience Yahweh as he governed from Eden, the place where the council met.

Our discussion in Chapter 11 also helps us understand that the “walking” language here denotes the presence of Yahweh in his cosmic throne room. In that chapter we saw that

the descriptions of Eden and Yahweh's "cosmic mountain"—the place where the divine council met—showed up in descriptions of the tabernacle and the temple. As we saw in Chapter 11, it is as though the temple, and in particular the holy of holies, was the place where heaven and earth met—the peak of the cosmic mountain, the gateway to another plane of reality.

It may come as a surprise, but the description of Yahweh "walking" is also used of God's active presence inside Israel's tabernacle, creating another link between Eden, the cosmic mountain, and the tabernacle sanctuary.¹³⁸ In Leviticus 26:11-12 we read, "I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." One can read the Old Testament in vain for any instance where Yahweh walked around the camp of Israel, as opposed to appearing in a cloud over the holy of holies, and so the description here isn't literally describing God glad-handing with the Israelites like a politician stumping for votes. Rather, the language is another way of saying that Yahweh's abode was among the Israelites, and where Yahweh's house was, his council was. On the other side of the veil as it were, was where Yahweh and his council could be found.

Other passages utilize the same language:

Deuteronomy 23:12 "You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. 13 And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement. 14 Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.

2 Samuel 7:4 But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, 5 "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been walking about in a tent for my dwelling. 7 In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"'

Adam's Kin

Several descendants of the first man also emerge as prophetic figures singled out as righteous men, all of whom are related to Adam. The first of these, as we saw above in Jesus' words, was Abel. After Abel came Seth, born in Adam's "image." After Seth we read of two men who "walked with God" (the same Hebrew verb used to describe God's "walking" above) who were widely viewed as prophetic figures within and without the Bible: Enoch and Noah.

Although we use the phrase "walk with God" quite frequently today, it is in fact a very rare biblical phrase, occurring only three times—all of them with respect to Enoch and

Noah. It is tempting to imagine the biblical writer is deliberately connecting God's "walking" with these two men, identifying them through this wording as two who stood in midst of the council in a direct encounter with God, but we cannot be sure. We can be certain, though, that these two men did directly encounter God, though few details are given.

Enoch is remembered in Genesis 5:22, 24 as never seeing death. These passages note that he walked with God, and God took him. Jewish writings from the time period between the Old and New Testaments, do in fact connect these few words with the divine council. In the book of *1 Enoch* (12:1ff.) the events of Genesis 5:22, 24 serve as the springboard to Enoch's visions of heaven and God's throne room. Enoch was considered God's mouthpiece by Jewish readers primarily because it he was the person who delivered God's words of judgment to the fallen sons of God after the Genesis 6:1-4 incident (*1 Enoch* 13-16). The New Testament also reports that Enoch "prophesied," as Jude 14-15 notes, "It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'Behold, the Lord came with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.'" This quotation by Jude comes from *1 Enoch* 1:9.

Noah walked with God according to Genesis 6:9. God spoke directly to Noah, as he had done to Adam before him, and many prophets after him. Noah was also God's mouthpiece, prophesying the coming flood to his contemporaries, warning them of the coming judgment (1 Pet. 3:20).

*The Patriarchs*¹³⁹

The pattern of an encounter with God or divine council members as validation of one's prophetic status gets clearer with the patriarchs. Since we've covered this ground in previous chapters, though not with an eye to understanding these events as having a meaningful pattern, we'll take an abbreviated tour here.

The reader will surely recall that Yahweh appeared to Abraham on several occasions.

Genesis 12

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." ⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at

Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

A repeat encounter is described in Genesis 15, where we are told that Abraham had a meeting the Word, the second Yahweh, as he began his spiritual journey (“... the Word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision ...”). This meeting took place after Abraham was settled in Canaan (Gen 13:12). Acts 7:2-4 informed us that Yahweh had actually appeared to him before this, while he lived in Ur:

² And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,³ and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.

There is a detail in these initial encounters that I have not mentioned before. Note that in Genesis 12:6-7 we are told that Yahweh appeared to Abraham at the Oak of Moreh, which was near Shechem. Yahweh’s subsequent visitation of Abraham just before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah occurred at a place called the Oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1 – “And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day”).

The Oak of Moreh and the Oaks of Mamre are what scholars call a terebinth—a sacred tree that got its sacred reputation because it marked a spot where a divine being appeared (and where divine beings kept appearing). In fact, “Oak of Moreh” literally means “Oak of the Teacher.” The point behind the name would be that some divine figure teaches people or dispenses information at this spot—what we commonly think of as an oracle. Such places were considered good places to bury dead loved ones since they were considered holy ground, or places where God “lived.”¹⁴⁰ Again the divine council connotations are transparent. We’ll see the association of sacred trees again momentarily.

God had chosen Abraham while he was still a pagan to be the father of Yahweh’s new earthly inheritance after the debacle at Babel, where the nations were given over to lesser *elohim* (Deut. 32:8-9). Abraham obeyed, journeyed to Canaan, and Yahweh made a covenant with him there. He alone had a relationship with the true God, and was destined to preserve and dispense the truth about the Lord of all *elohim* to the dispossessed nations (Gen 12:3). He was God’s man and God’s conduit for salvation to the rest of the humanity.

Abraham’s son, Isaac, enjoyed the same covenantal status, and Yahweh also appeared to him when confirming the covenant between Him and Abraham with Isaac:

Genesis 26

¹ Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. ² And the LORD (Yahweh) appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. ³ Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. ⁴ I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”

Jacob’s life is filled with dramatic divine council manifestations, and the elect status of Abraham was again confirmed to Jacob in his “dream interview” with Yahweh at Bethel, the episode known popularly as “Jacob’s ladder” (Genesis 28:10ff.):

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it . . .

This initiation was followed by a series of encounters:

Genesis 31:11-13

¹¹ Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am!’ ¹² And he said, ‘Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. ¹³ I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.’ ”

Genesis 32:22ff.

²² The same night he [Jacob] arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷ And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my

name?” And there he blessed him.³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.”

The pattern that emerges from the patriarchal sagas is that when God chooses someone to represent him, that person must first meet with God. By necessity, that meeting is with the visible Yahweh, who can be discerned by human senses. In many cases, the divine job interview occurs in a place that is described as God’s home or headquarters, the place where the divine council meets.

Moses and Joshua

It should be obvious that the pattern for divine approval of prophetic status holds true for Moses. Deuteronomy 34:10 makes it clear that Moses was a prophet, and his numerous divine encounters validated that status. In Exodus 3, Moses met the visible Yahweh—the Angel of Yahweh—and heard the voice of God from the burning bush. Here is a sampling from the Old Testament of other divine encounters, several of which we’ve seen before in other chapters. Note the connection with the tent of meeting and the tabernacle, which, as Chapter 11 detailed, served as the visible cosmic mountain, the abode of Yahweh in lieu of Eden and the gateway to his council quarters.

Exodus 24

¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.¹⁶ The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Exodus 33

⁷ Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.⁸ Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent.⁹ When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses.¹⁰ And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door.¹¹ Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.

As we’ll see in a moment, the impression of divine approval and validation of Moses was so deep upon the people of Israel that, from the days of Moses onward, meeting with God became a criterion for true prophetic status. There are hints even in the days of Moses that divine encounter was what convinced people that someone was God’s man. Consider the two passages below:

Exodus 19

⁷ So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸ All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. ⁹ And the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.”

The implication is clear—the people need to listen and will listen to the person who is validated by an encounter with the presence of God.

Numbers 11

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

The seventy elders who would help Moses in his administration of Israel were brought before the presence of God, who gave them a portion of the spirit that rested on Moses—linking them to the divine encounter approval that validated Moses’ position. Only a true prophet has access to the divine.

This linkage to the presence of God through Moses is what initially validated Joshua as a prophet, at least until his own personal encounter with the visible Yahweh. Note the following passages:

Exodus 24

¹² The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³ So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ And he said to the elders, “Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them.”

Exodus 33

⁹ When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. ¹⁰ And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. ¹¹ Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again

into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

Deuteronomy 31

¹⁴ And the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, the days approach when you must die. Call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, that I may commission him.” And Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting. ¹⁵ And the LORD appeared in the tent in a pillar of cloud. And the pillar of cloud stood over the entrance of the tent. ¹⁶ And the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers . . . ²³ And the LORD commissioned Joshua the son of Nun and said, “Be strong and courageous, for you shall bring the people of Israel into the land that I swore to give them. I will be with you.”

It is clear that Joshua experienced the kind of divine encounter that Moses had, even before his “official” commissioning in Deuteronomy 31. After Moses died and Joshua took the mantle of leadership, Joshua met the Angel of Yahweh himself as he was about to invade Jericho:

Joshua 5

¹³ When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” ¹⁴ And he said, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, “What does my lord say to his servant?” ¹⁵ And the commander of the LORD’s army said to Joshua, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.

This is a fascinating passage. As close readers of the Old Testament, it is fairly easy for us to establish that the “man” in the passage is the Angel of Yahweh. An important clue is the drawn sword in his hand. The Hebrew phrasing here occurs only two other times in the Hebrew Bible, Numbers 22:23 and 1 Chron. 21:16. Both explicitly name the Angel of Yahweh as the one with the “drawn sword” in hand. That this is the Angel of Yahweh is made unmistakable on two other counts: (1) the language in the passage that is drawn from Exodus 3, the account of the burning bush (“take your sandals from off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy”) and (2) the fact that Joshua bows and worships. Aside from these textual clues, it is interesting to speculate on how Joshua was able to discern that this “man” was the Angel. My guess—and it is only a guess—is that he had heard the voice before, as it was only when the Angel spoke that Joshua reacted in reverence. Having accompanied Moses into the proximity of the divine presence on a number of occasions, Joshua had heard the voice of the Almighty before. He knew it as soon as he heard the Commander of the Israel’s host speak.

The Judges

Thus far in our journey we've only looked at one of the judges of Israel in terms of divine encounter—Samuel. In our investigation of the Word of the Lord as an embodied Yahweh figure, we looked closely at several verses in 1 Samuel 3:

¹ Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision . . . ⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵ and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶ And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the young man. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.' " So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰ And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears . . . " ¹⁹ And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. ²¹ And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

Samuel was the last of the judges, but he was not the only judge described as experiencing an appearance of the visible Yahweh. In Judges 6 we read that Gideon's call to serve as a judge in Israel came with an encounter of the Angel of Yahweh and the voice of Yahweh—just as it had been with Moses:

¹¹ Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. ¹² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor." ¹³ And Gideon said to him, "Please, sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian." ¹⁴ And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?" ¹⁵ And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." ¹⁶ And the LORD said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man." ¹⁷ And he said to him, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speaks with me." ¹⁸ Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you." And he said, "I will stay till you return . . ." ²¹ Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened

cakes. And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight.²² Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD. And Gideon said, “Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.”²³ But the LORD said to him, “Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.”

This passage is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it should be observed that the Angel appeared to Gideon at a sacred tree (v. 11). Second, verses 12-14 make it clear that the Angel and Yahweh can be distinguished, for they place Yahweh in the conversation along with the Angel. The same can be said of verses 21 and 23, since the Angel vanishes in verse 21, but Yahweh is still talking to Gideon in verse 23. Since by the time of the Judges in the biblical narrative readers know very clearly that the Angel is the embodied Yahweh, we have a clear instance here of two Yahweh figures in the same passage.

The Classical Prophets

Perhaps the most familiar initiation of a prophet into Yahweh’s divine council throne room is the case of Isaiah. Isaiah 6 is certainly not new ground for readers:

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.³ And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.”

The divine rite of passage experienced by Ezekiel in the first two chapters of the book that bears his name is probably second only to Isaiah 6. Note the underlined references to familiar items associated with appearances of the visible Yahweh at Sinai and the appearance of shining beings associated with the council:

¹ In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God . . .⁴ As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal.⁵ And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures . . .¹³ As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of

the fire went forth lightning . . . ²² Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads. ²³ And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. ²⁴ And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. ²⁵ And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings. ²⁶ And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. ²⁷ And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. ²⁸ Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

¹ And he said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.”

² And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. ³ And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day.

The prophet Jeremiah also fits the pattern. We saw in an earlier chapter that the embodied Word appeared to Jeremiah to commission him for duty. The details are sketched here from Jeremiah 1:

¹ The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ² to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.

³ It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. ⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” ⁶ Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” ⁷ But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD.” ⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Jeremiah's dramatic call by the embodied Yahweh is quite important in the book of Jeremiah, for it serves as the basis of true prophet status. What began in the days of Moses as public validation of his call and those who served with him became fixated in the minds of Israelites as a litmus test to apply to any who claimed to be God's vessel. In Jeremiah 23 we read God's own words about false prophets:

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷ They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.' "

¹⁸ For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened? ¹⁹ Behold, the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. ²⁰ The anger of the LORD will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart. In the latter days you will understand it clearly. ²¹ "I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. ²² But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds.

The implications are clear: true prophets have stood and listened in the council; false prophets have not. This test of prophetic status never went away in Israel. It was alive and well in the days of Jesus and the apostles—which helps explain several New Testament passages that are critical to New Testament theology. These instances are the subject of Chapter 21. For now, we must remain in the Old Testament and explore an office even more important than that of prophet. Nothing, not even the high priestly office, outranked kingship in Israel, for the it was the king who was described as the son of Yahweh on earth—and sonship of God quite obviously has something to do with the divine council.

¹³⁸ Wenham, G. J. (2002). *Vol. 1: Word Biblical Commentary : Genesis 1-15*. Word Biblical Commentary (76). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

¹³⁹ Joseph is omitted from this discussion, since God's activity in his life is described in providential terms. However, his meeting with "a man" (Gen. 37:15) is often taken by interpreters as an encounter with an embodied angel. The text isn't clear that this is supposition is accurate. However, this incident happened at Shechem, which was the location of the Oak of Moreh (see the discussion on sacred trees and the Angel of Yahweh).

¹⁴⁰ See I Chron. 10:12; Gen 35:8

Chapter 20

Gone, But Not Forgotten

Although they were the voices of the true God, the prophets failed in their mission to turn the hearts of Yahweh's earthly children away from the gods of the disinherited nations. The story is a familiar one if you've spent much time reading the Old Testament.

Things were fine for a while under David and then Solomon, but the ideal of Israelite kingship didn't last long. What began as a trickle under David in terms of violating the principles laid down in Deuteronomy for kings eventually became a torrent under Solomon. Building a large standing army, multiplying wives, accumulating staggering wealth were all part of Solomon's administration. The taxes and forced labor required to support his building projects—the temple and his own lavish palace—stressed the people to the breaking point.

Consequently when Solomon died and it came time for his son Rehoboam to succeed him, the people requested that he ease the burden. Rehoboam foolishly ignored their plea and the rest, as they say, is history. Israel split into two realms, with ten of the twelve tribes pledging loyalty to another ruler, Jereboam. It is important to note that Jereboam's kingdom had its own alternative system of worship to prevent people in his new dominion from making pilgrimages to the Jerusalem temple, located in the southern kingdom of Judah, where Rehoboam was king. The alternative worship system, removed as it was from Yahweh's temple and priesthood, quickly gave way to the worship of the foreign gods of the disinherited nations, especially Baal. The southern kings of the line of David went back and forth in their loyalty to Yahweh, but apostasy eventually overtook the rue worship of Yahweh.

God's Divorce

The Old Testament uses a powerful, at times shocking, metaphor for the kind of apostasy that resulted from Jereboam's spiritual disloyalty to Yahweh and his temple: the adulterous wife. What constitutes spiritual adultery? Generally, not worshipping the true God and turning one's back on the priesthood, festivals, and sacrifices—all of which Jereboam's new system of worship did. But it was far worse than choosing a different hymnal or tinkering with theological propositions. God's people adopted the worst of pagan spirituality, including child sacrifice (Ezek. 16:20-21; Jer. 32:30-35). Spiritual whoredom is the language used by God, through the prophets, to describe what he thinks of Israel's behavior in some of the most explicit material in ancient literature, much less the Bible.

Perhaps the most familiar example is that of the book of Hosea, who prophesied in the last days of the northern kingdom. Hosea was commanded by God to marry a prostitute as a living analogy to God's own marriage to Israel. First the northern kingdom of Israel was scattered to the wind by the Assyrians, known for their extraordinary cruelty and policy of displacing and removing populations from the regions they conquered. I like to refer to them as the Klingons of the Old Testament, but their displacement policy is more reminiscent of how the Nazis deported the Jews, splitting up families and destroying national identity. It's no wonder (but a bit of an overstatement) that the northern ten tribes came to be known as the lost tribes of Israel. God was through with them . . . or so it seemed.

That wasn't the end of the metaphor, though. The remaining kingdom, Judah, is described in the same way. Our English translations mute the explicit nature of what is said in many of these passages, but the situation isn't difficult to comprehend in passages like Ezekiel 16.

¹ Again the word of the LORD came to me: ² "Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, ³ and say, Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. ⁴ And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. ⁵ No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born. ⁶ "And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' ⁷ I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. ⁸ "When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine . . . ¹⁵ "But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. ¹⁶ You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be. ¹⁷ You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the whore. ¹⁸ And you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and my incense before them . . . ²⁴ you built yourself a vaulted chamber and made yourself a lofty place in every square. ²⁵ At the head of every street you built your lofty place and made your beauty an abomination, offering yourself to any passerby and multiplying your whoring. ²⁶ You also played the whore with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, multiplying your whoring, to provoke me to anger. ²⁷ Behold, therefore, I stretched out my hand against you and diminished your allotted portion and delivered you to the greed of your enemies, the daughters of the Philistines, who were ashamed of your lewd

behavior.²⁸ You played the whore also with the Assyrians, because you were not satisfied; yes, you played the whore with them, and still you were not satisfied.²⁹ You multiplied your whoring also with the trading land of Chaldea, and even with this you were not satisfied.³⁰ “How sick is your heart, declares the Lord GOD, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute,³¹ building your vaulted chamber at the head of every street, and making your lofty place in every square. Yet you were not like a prostitute, because you scorned payment.³² Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband!³³ Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side with your whorings.³⁴ So you were different from other women in your whorings. No one solicited you to play the whore, and you gave payment, while no payment was given to you; therefore you were different.

In a nutshell, God describes his bride as a nymphomaniac whore, a woman who *pays* men for sex, going far beyond a normal prostitute who expects to *be paid*. On every street corner Yahweh’s wife sets up shop and plies her wares. It’s even more explicit in Hebrew, trust me.

By Ezekiel’s time, Israel had been destroyed by Assyria and Judah was already partially in exile. God actually uses the language of divorce in both cases. If that language sounds a bit incongruous for God, it isn’t. God had warned both kingdoms that he would divorce her if her behavior didn’t change. God had already divorced Israel and kicked her out of his house (Hosea 2:2 – “she is not my wife, and I am not her husband”; cf. Hosea 9:15). Speaking of the two kingdoms as “sisters” in Jeremiah 3 God says through the prophet:

⁶ The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah: “Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore?”⁷ And I thought, ‘After she has done all this she will return to me,’ but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it.⁸ She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore.⁹ Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree.¹⁰ Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD.”

This passage is interesting in that it uses the language of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which forbids a man who has divorced his wife for “uncleanness” from taking her back in remarriage. As we’ll see in a subsequent chapter, God remarries, but his wife is a “new Israel,” not the old one, in accordance with this law.

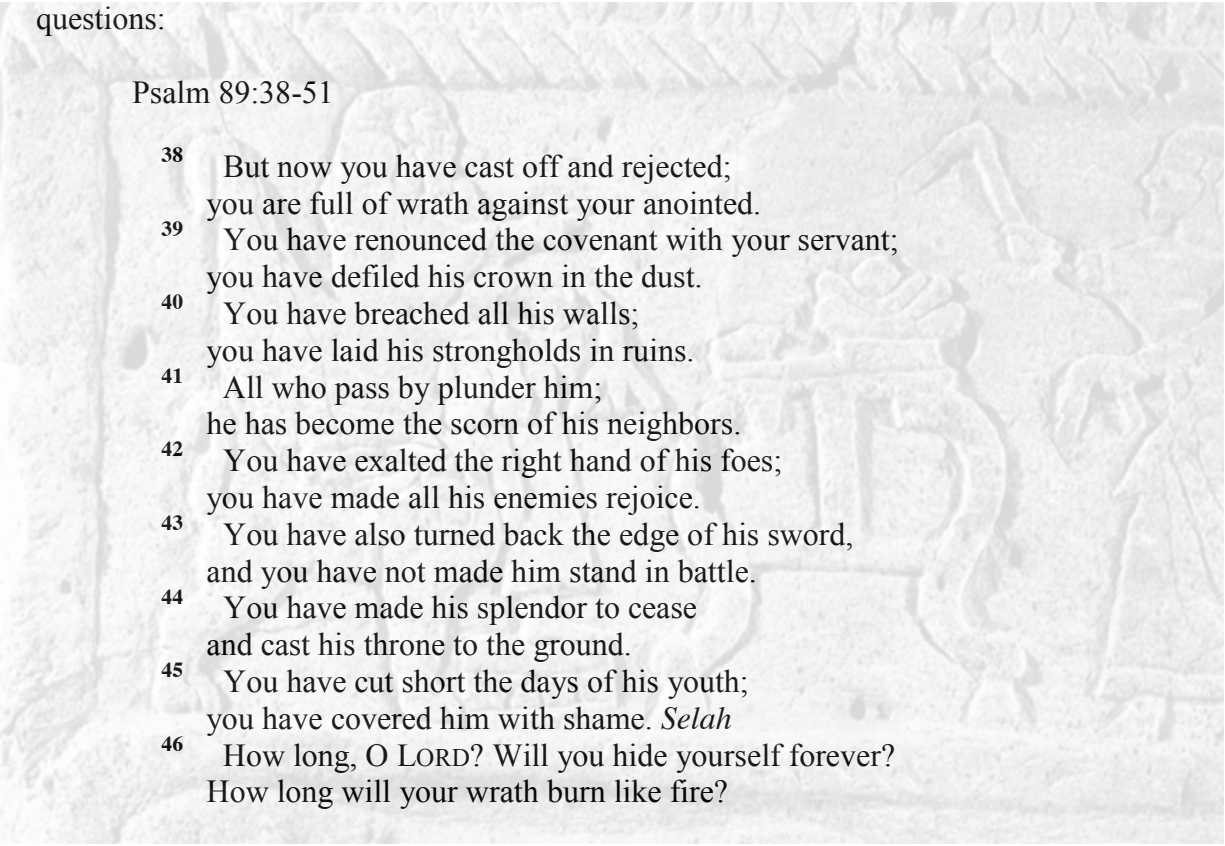
God Forsakes His Royal Children

As we noted in the last chapter it was the task of the prophets to call the people back to Yahweh, but their mission soon morphed into little more than warnings that judgment was coming. And come it did. The Assyrians were as efficient as they were cruel.

Roughly 160 years later the southern kingdom, Judah, was conquered and sent into captivity in Babylon. Not only is this situation described as a divorce, it's cast as a reversal of the covenant—as though Yahweh was now disinheriting his child as he had disinherited the other nations at Babel.

The Old Testament gives us more than just a glimpse of this despair. It's after this deportation under Nebuchadnezzar that we read some of the most heartrending material in the Old Testament.¹⁴¹ Yahweh's people, jolted by the reality of their demise, believed that they had been disinherited themselves. Whereas the biblical writer of the book of 2 Samuel had made it clear that Yahweh promised David an everlasting kingly dynasty as the divine imager on earth in the cosmic garden-mountain, Jerusalem, the overthrow of king and temple forced the psalmist to take a reality check and ask some terrifying questions:

Psalm 89:38-51

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- 38 But now you have cast off and rejected;
you are full of wrath against your anointed.
39 You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust.
40 You have breached all his walls;
you have laid his strongholds in ruins.
41 All who pass by plunder him;
he has become the scorn of his neighbors.
42 You have exalted the right hand of his foes;
you have made all his enemies rejoice.
43 You have also turned back the edge of his sword,
and you have not made him stand in battle.
44 You have made his splendor to cease
and cast his throne to the ground.
45 You have cut short the days of his youth;
you have covered him with shame. *Selah*
46 How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?

We've seen Psalm 89 before. The Psalm begins (89:5-8) with a declaration of Yahweh's incomparability in the divine council. It then proceeds with the promise of an everlasting covenant with David's dynastic line. We saw in Chapter 17 that the Davidic king was to be the inheritor of all the disinherited nations the *elyon* over all kings of the earth (89:27). This promise came with the assurance that the covenant will be guaranteed by "a faithful witness in the clouds" (89:35-37) who was a member of the divine council. But now there was no throne, no king, no temple, no nation, and no relationship with Yahweh. Psalm 89:46 asks the obvious question: How long will Yahweh be angry with us? Had Yahweh indeed "renounced the covenant" (v. 39)? What about the guarantee before the council?

Incredibly, even as the exile in Babylon was beginning, as both the metaphor of a divorced wife and forsaken children were just beginning to be experienced in reality, God had a message for the prophets that he was not finished with his plan to restore Eden and have an earthly family. Even after Yahweh would forsake and punish his people, he wouldn't completely abandon them forever. There would be a remnant for whom he would revive his covenant and with whom he would make a new covenant, but in ways they could hardly envision—ways that are explained in the New Testament and that involved a new wife and new family composition involving the very Gentile nations who were now his enemies.

The message of hope began in Ezekiel 1, a chapter we've already looked at a few times. Ezekiel sees a vision of Yahweh's throne, with the visible, embodied Yahweh on the throne. The four faces of the cherubim in the vision are, not coincidentally, the four cardinal points of the zodiac used in Babylon at the time.¹⁴² The implication would have been clear to Ezekiel and his hearers or readers: the sovereign power of God's throne reaches every corner of the earth—even Babylon. What may look like a hopeless situation was under the sovereign control of God. He was still on the throne and still on the job. That he wanted Ezekiel and the rest of the captives to hear this message indicates that he wasn't done with his people just yet. They would suffer, but only for a time. Recall that Ezekiel was the prophet through whom the vision of the new temple was given (Ezekiel 40-48).

The book of Daniel, written sometime after the last stage of deportation to Babylon was completed, amplifies the simple message of Ezekiel 1 that, although Israel was gone into exile, she was not forgotten. In fact, Daniel's message includes visionary glimpses of the fate of God's people, beginning with the powers that conquered Judah. Beginning with Babylon, the book of Daniel describes for Judah a series of disinherited nations that would, in one way or another, dominate and abuse her. This series of events, which spans centuries, is described not only as the decree of God, but also the decree of the divine council. In what remains of this chapter and in the next, we'll take a look at these divine decrees.

The Decree of Yahweh, the Decree of the Council

The book of Daniel relates several events in the life of the prophet connected to members of the divine council, each of which gives him insight into Yahweh's plans for Israel or Yahweh's sovereign control over the kingdoms of other nations. The teaching point is clear: the God of Israel is in control over world affairs. The nations who have conquered them are subject to judgment, and God will have his kingdom.

The book of Daniel begins to show Yahweh's control over the future of the nations through the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and the prophet Daniel's interpretation of those dreams. In Daniel 2 Nebuchadnezzar sees a huge statue composed of four different metals. Daniel informs the king that the four metals represent four kingdoms: Babylon and the three future kingdoms that will supersede Babylon. In Daniel 4

Nebuchadnezzar sees a “watcher, that is a holy one” in his dream (Dan. 4:10-19). Daniel interprets the dream, which prophesies Nebuchadnezzar’s personal humiliation in which God will afflict him with temporary insanity because he has refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of the God of Israel (4:20-37).

A couple of items in Daniel 4 are of interest. The word “watcher” occurs only in Daniel 4 in the Old Testament (4:13, 17, 23), but it is a common word used in Jewish literature between the Old and New Testament when that literature retells the stories of the sons of God in Genesis 6. In other words, “watchers” is a term synonymous with “sons of God”; they are members of the divine council.

In Daniel 4:17 Nebuchadnezzar’s punishment is described this way:

¹⁷ The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.’

The message of the superiority of the God of Israel over those people who had conquered the children of Israel is clear. Notice that this decision is described as a decision handed down by the watchers (plural), the holy ones (plural). The point is not that they rule over all the nations, since we are told that the decree they have dispensed is for the purpose of letting Nebuchadnezzar who exactly does rule: the Most High God of Israel. We looked at this passage very briefly in Chapter 4 when making the point that God’s imagers (heavenly or earthly) have genuine free will and participate in the progression of God’s plans. A few verses later, though, the language is slightly altered:

²⁴ this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, ²⁵ that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. ²⁶ And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules. ²⁷ Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.”

This time the decree comes from the Most High, not the watchers. Is there a contradiction? No—the point is that the decrees of the Most High are the decrees of the watchers, and vice versa. The Most High is the authority in heaven (hence the title “Most High”), and the council is an extension of him. As noted in earlier chapters (see esp.

Chapter 4), the members of the council often deliver messages and have freedom in carrying out divine decrees.¹⁴³

In other places in Daniel it is the prophet who is visited by divine beings, often in waking visions. These beings are described as human in appearance. Along with these beings, there is at times *a disembodied voice who commands these beings*. This disembodied voice will be important in what follows, so let's take a look at some passages.

Daniel 8

¹ In the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar a vision appeared to me, Daniel, after that which appeared to me at the first. ² And I saw in the vision; and when I saw, I was in Susa the capital, which is in the province of Elam. And I saw in the vision, and I was at the Ulai canal. ³ I raised my eyes and saw, and behold, a ram standing on the bank of the canal. It had two horns, and both horns were high, but one was higher than the other, and the higher one came up last. ⁴ I saw the ram charging westward and northward and southward. No beast could stand before him, and there was no one who could rescue from his power. He did as he pleased and became great. ⁵ As I was considering, behold, a male goat came from the west across the face of the whole earth, without touching the ground. And the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes. ⁶ He came to the ram with the two horns, which I had seen standing on the bank of the canal, and he ran at him in his powerful wrath. ⁷ I saw him come close to the ram, and he was enraged against him and struck the ram and broke his two horns. And the ram had no power to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground and trampled on him. And there was no one who could rescue the ram from his power. ⁸ Then the goat became exceedingly great, but when he was strong, the great horn was broken, and instead of it there came up four conspicuous horns toward the four winds of heaven. ⁹ Out of one of them came a little horn, which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land. ¹⁰ It grew great, even to the host of heaven. And some of the host and some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them. ¹¹ It became great, even as great as the Prince of the host. And the regular burnt offering was taken away from him, and the place of his sanctuary was overthrown. ¹² And a host will be given over to it together with the regular burnt offering because of transgression, and it will throw truth to the ground, and it will act and prosper. ¹³ Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to the one who spoke, "For how long is the vision concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot?" ¹⁴ And he said to me, "For 2,300 evenings and mornings. Then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state." ¹⁵ When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I sought to understand it. And behold, there stood before me one having the appearance of a man. ¹⁶ And I heard a man's voice between the banks of the Ulai, and it called, "Gabriel, make this man understand the vision." ¹⁷ So he came near where I stood. And when he came, I was frightened and fell on my face. But he said to me, "Understand, O son of man, that the vision is for the time of the end." ¹⁸ And

when he had spoken to me, I fell into a deep sleep with my face to the ground. But he touched me and made me stand up. ¹⁹ He said, “Behold, I will make known to you what shall be at the latter end of the indignation, for it refers to the appointed time of the end. ²⁰ As for the ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia. ²¹ And the goat is the king of Greece. And the great horn between his eyes is the first king. ²² As for the horn that was broken, in place of which four others arose, four kingdoms shall arise from his nation, but not with his power. ²³ And at the latter end of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their limit, a king of bold face, one who understands riddles, shall arise. ²⁴ His power shall be great—but not by his own power; and he shall cause fearful destruction and shall succeed in what he does, and destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints. ²⁵ By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great. Without warning he shall destroy many. And he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes, and he shall be broken—but by no human hand. ²⁶ The vision of the evenings and the mornings that has been told is true, but seal up the vision, for it refers to many days from now.” ²⁷ And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days. Then I rose and went about the king’s business, but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it.

Let’s boil down the passage into the essential elements for our purposes:

- Daniel sees a ram with two horns.
- The ram with two horns gets attacked by a goat with a single large horn.
 - This ram and its two horns are the kingdoms of Media and Persia.
 - The goat is the kingdom of Greece; it’s horn is its king.
- The goat defeats the ram, but its horn is broken.
 - Greece defeats Media and Persia, after which the king of Greece dies
- Out of the goat’s horn come four other horns.
 - The king of Greece is replaced by four other kings who are inferior to him
- One of the four horns becomes great, “even to the host of heaven.”
 - One of the four new Greek kings assaults the “host of heaven.”
- We are told of a being called the “Prince of the host” who is opposed by this new great horn.
- The “Prince of the Host” is also called the “Prince of princes,” since the attack of the new great horn against this “prince” is described twice, once with each of those phrases.
- This new, great horn defeats “some of the host” and “some of the stars.”
- The new, great horn is given power over “a host” so that regular burnt offerings in the sanctuary cease.
- Daniel then sees “a man” who is actually the angel Gabriel, though he is never called “angel” in the passage.
- There is also a separate *human voice* who commands Gabriel.
- We are not given the identity of the goat, ram, horn(s), or host.

Scholars have found it easy to make sense of what's going on here, especially since the text gives us specific names. Daniel 8 very transparently describes the final two kingdoms under which Daniel worked while in exile – the Medes and the Persians. Daniel is told that these two kingdoms (which were administratively one—hence there is one ram) will be conquered by Greece, which they were, under the leadership of Alexander the Great. After Alexander dies, his kingdom was in fact divided into four sections. One of those sectional kingdoms attacked Jerusalem with the result that the daily burnt offerings in the sanctuary were halted. The king at the time was Antiochus Epiphanes, who committed various abominations against the Jewish people at this time in history.

But what about the “host” language? Readers should by now be able to parse the language. We have seen that language such as “host of heaven” and “stars” refers to the sons of God, Yahweh’s heavenly family as it were. But we also know that these very same metaphors were used of the actual people of Israel (e.g., Gen. 15:1-5; 22:17; 26:4; 37:9-11; Exod. 4:22-23; 32:11). So what is being described, the assault against heavenly beings or Israelites?

In my judgment, the answer is *both*. The vision here in Daniel 8 is another example of the “as in heaven, so on earth” language of the Bible. In the physical, embodied world of humanity, Israel was assaulted and oppressed by these kingdoms, and the raids of Antiochus Epiphanes are described perfectly with respect to actual history that would transpire. But this earthly conflict reflected a spiritual conflict in the unseen world, where the “princes” of the disinherited nations of Media, Persia, and Greece were in conflict with each other for superiority and against the Prince protecting Israel and his own heavenly forces. We learn here in Daniel 8 that the battle is real—evil can indeed win, for both human and divine “host” and “stars” defeated.

How do we know this language includes the unseen world? The answer is found in Daniel 10, where the conflicts of Daniel 8 are described once again.

Daniel 10

¹ In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a word was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belteshazzar. And the word was true, and it was a great conflict. And he understood the word and had understanding of the vision. ² In those days I, Daniel, was mourning for three weeks. ³ I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks. ⁴ On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris) ⁵ I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. ⁶ His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude. ⁷ And I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, for the men who were with me did not see the vision, but a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled to hide themselves. ⁸ So I was left alone and saw this great

vision, and no strength was left in me. My radiant appearance was fearfully changed, and I retained no strength. ⁹ Then I heard the sound of his words, and as I heard the sound of his words, I fell on my face in deep sleep with my face to the ground. ¹⁰ And behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. ¹¹ And he said to me, “O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you.” And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. ¹² Then he said to me, “Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. ¹³ The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, ¹⁴ and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come.” ¹⁵ When he had spoken to me according to these words, I turned my face toward the ground and was mute. ¹⁶ And behold, one in the likeness of the children of man touched my lips. Then I opened my mouth and spoke. I said to him who stood before me, “O my lord, by reason of the vision pains have come upon me, and I retain no strength. ¹⁷ How can my lord’s servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.” ¹⁸ Again one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me. ¹⁹ And he said, “O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage.” And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, “Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me.” ²⁰ Then he said, “Do you know why I have come to you? But now I will return to fight against the prince of Persia; and when I go out, behold, the prince of Greece will come. ²¹ But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth: there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince.

What do we learn in Daniel 10? Several items:

- Daniel is actually in the presence of more than one heavenly being. These beings are described in embodied terms (e.g., “hand”), which is quite consistent with descriptions of angels elsewhere, including the visible Yahweh, the Angel.
- The divine speaker fought against the prince of Persia.
- This speaker was assisted by Michael, who is “one of the chief princes” and “your prince” (i.e., the prince of Daniel’s people, Israel).
 - This description means that the speaker is not Michael. Michael is actually distinguished from the speaker two times (10:13, 21).
 - That Michael is called “one of the chief princes” suggests that Michael is not the “Prince of princes” of Daniel 8. “Chief princes” is likely the equivalent of “archangel” in Greek. Michael is one of several archangels in intertestamental Jewish literature.
- The speaking divine being is also distinguished from the prince of Greece.

While the word for “prince” used here is most often used of human rulers in the Old Testament, since the word is used to describe Michael and those princes against whom he is fighting, it is evident here that “prince” in Daniel 8 and 10 refer to divine beings.

To this point, the text is pretty clear, but we are left with questions. Just who is the speaker in these chapters? What is the speaker’s relationship to Michael? Who is the Prince of princes, the Prince of the Host? Does the speaker have any relationship to those titles? These aren’t easy questions, but I think we can unravel them. It’s important to make sense of the divine hierarchy in question because of other material we’ll encounter momentarily.

Many have concluded that the “Prince of the host” is indeed Michael, since the host that gets conquered in Daniel 8 is Israel. While that may sound coherent, it’s actually only half the story. If one reads words like “host” as having a double reference—to people (Israel) and to divine beings (heavenly host), then an identification of Michael isn’t a given. The language elsewhere in the Old Testament is used of both the human children of Yahweh and his heavenly council children—and I suggest viewing Daniel 8 and 10 against that backdrop is the key to sorting all this out.

In keeping with my listing format for this chapter, here are my suggestions:

- The “Prince of the host” and “Prince of princes” are the same entity.
- The phrase “Prince of the host” in Daniel 8:11 refers to the *heavenly* commander of the entire heavenly host. This allows Michael to be the prince of Israel (Yahweh’s earthly “host”) but not over the entire heavenly host—he can’t be, since he’s just one of several archangels in intertestamental Jewish literature. Gabriel is another.

These suggestions still leave the issue of the identity of the speaker and his relationship to Michael and the titles “Prince of the (heavenly) host” and “Prince of princes.” We get some help from Daniel 11, where there is a parallel to what we’ve read in Daniel 8:

In Daniel 11 we are treated to another prophetic vision that virtually all scholars agree mirrors the deeds of Antiochus Epiphanes, the same person who fulfilled the words of Daniel 8. It is well known that, along with having the daily burnt offerings in the sanctuary cease, Antiochus also did what’s described in Daniel 11 as “the abomination which makes desolate.” All of this is described in the historical Jewish book of *I Maccabees* (1:29-33, 41-57).¹⁴⁴

This linkage between Daniel 8 and Daniel 11 is important when we note the parallel below:

Daniel 8	Daniel 11
8:11 – It (the little horn / Greek king) <u>became great, even as great as the Prince of the host.</u> And the regular burnt offering was taken away from him, and the place of his sanctuary was overthrown. 8:25 - And <u>he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes,</u> and he shall be broken—but by no human hand.	“And the king shall do as he wills. He shall <u>exalt himself and magnify himself above every god,</u> and shall speak astonishing things <u>against the God of gods . . .</u>”

This parallel suggests that the “Prince of the host” and “Prince of princes” are descriptions that parallel “God of gods.” In other words, when the little horn opposes the “Prince of the host” and “Prince of princes” he is opposing God—the God who is over all other *elohim*. But is this possible? Is Yahweh ever described as a “prince,” a term that implies subordinate status to some higher authority?

Had we not come this far in our discussion of the two Yahwehs and the divine council, the answer we’d most likely jump to would be “no way.” But the answer is actually yes—and Yahweh’s supremacy is not violated. We’ve been over the fact that the visible Yahweh, the second Yahweh as it were, who is under the authority of the invisible Yahweh, often comes to human beings as the Angel. The Angel “is but isn’t” Yahweh (“the Father”); he is the visible Yahweh sent by the invisible Yahweh to interact with human beings. As such, he is over all other members of the *heavenly* host since he is identified with Yahweh. But what does this have to do with Yahweh being called a prince? The answer is that, while the invisible Yahweh (“the Father”) is never called a prince, the visible Yahweh is described with this term. Turning to Joshua 5:11-14 we read:

¹³ When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” ¹⁴ And he said, “No; but I am the commander (Hebrew, “prince”) of the army (Hebrew, “host”) of the LORD. Now I have come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped and said to him, “What does my lord say to his servant?” ¹⁵ And the commander (“prince”) of the LORD’s army (“host”) said to Joshua, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.

This is an amazing text. The very phrase used in Daniel – the “prince of the host” is found here two times! The prince here is a deity figure, for he commands the very same thing of Joshua that the Angel commanded of Moses before the burning bush, inside of which was the Angel of Yahweh: “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy” (see Exod. 3:1-5). But, you might protest, the word

“angel” isn’t in Joshua 5:13-15. Aside from the very obvious linkages to the Angel in the burning bush we just noted, there’s one more piece of evidence that links this “prince of the host” to the Angel who is the visible Yahweh. The prince is described as standing “with his drawn sword in his hand.” This phrase occurs only four times in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament: here in Joshua 5:13 and also in Numbers 22:23, 31 and 1 Chronicles 21:16. The other three references read as follows, and all have one thing in common:

Numbers 22

²³ And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road.

³¹ Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face.

1 Chronicles 21

¹⁶ And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces.

The common element is the Angel of Yahweh. Everywhere this phrase is used it is used to describe the Angel who is the visible Yahweh. Joshua 5:13-15 is no exception, since the phrasing drawn from the burning bush story makes it clear that it is the Angel who is speaking to Joshua.

Taking this information back to Daniel, I would suggest that the Prince of the host in Daniel 8 should be identified with the Prince of the host in Joshua 5—none other than the Angel of Yahweh, who is the chief representative of Yahweh, and who is Yahweh in human form in the Old Testament. If we make this correlation, the language in Daniel falls into place. It is the Angel in Daniel 10 whom Michael assists in defending Israel, and in softening up the prince of Persia so the prince of Greece can come along and defeat him, as had been prophesied.

This is the picture, then, that emerges during the exile. Israel is gone into exile, but not forgotten. Behind Israel’s circumstances a spiritual war rages between the elohim of Israel’s enemy nations and the Most High, the visible Yahweh, and their council. Victory is not immediate, for the forces of evil are being steered toward a different sort of victory . . . a different sort of kingdom that would come.

¹⁴¹ The book of Lamentations is probably the best example.

¹⁴² Get the page numbers from Block’s NICOT Ezekiel commentary here.

¹⁴³ This is very similar to certain passages in the Baal Cycle describing El and the Ugaritic council (for the web).

¹⁴⁴ Many Christians consider Daniel 11 to be a prefigurement of a future desecration, since Jesus, who lived well after the events of Antiochus, informed his audience that the abomination which makes desolate was yet to come. Jews of Jesus' day would have known what such a thing would look like based upon the same language being used in 1 Maccabees of the Antiochus blasphemy.



Chapter 21

Thy Kingdom Come

It's taken nineteen chapters, but we're finally at the point where the notion of the two Yahwehs crystallized in my mind years ago. And the passage that will be our focus for this chapter not only made the circle complete for me, but it's also one of the most pivotal for early Judaism's doctrine of two powers in heaven—before it became a heresy in the wake of Jesus' ministry and the apostolic preaching of the resurrection.¹⁴⁵ I'm speaking, of course, of Daniel 7:9-14, the prophet's vision of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man. To be honest, though, the whole chapter is important for the divine council worldview I'm sketching, so we're going to walk through the entire chapter (primarily ESV):

The Divine Council Meeting of Daniel 7

Daniel 7:1-8

¹ In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter. ² Daniel declared, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. ³ And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. ⁴ The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. ⁵ And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, 'Arise, devour much flesh.' ⁶ After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. ⁷ After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. ⁸ I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.

The description of these four beasts is certainly bizarre, but we've seen the elements of the descriptions before. Some parts of the description are shared with the four faced

cherubim of Ezekiel 1. The metals derive from the book of Daniel itself, the dream of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2. More pointedly, a connection between Daniel 2 and Daniel 7 is made explicit in Daniel 7:17ff., where the text affirms that the Daniel 7 vision is about four nations, just as the dream in Daniel 2. The little horn speaking great things sounds a lot like the little horn of Daniel 8. In point of fact, scholars across many Christian traditions have found considerable agreement between Daniel 2, 7, and 8.¹⁴⁶ I agree with the consensus, so we need not get bogged down in exploring these relationships. Besides, it's what follows that makes the passage really fascinating. I've underlined some important items and translated this portion myself.

Daniel 7:9-12

⁹ “As I was looking,
thrones were set up,
and the Ancient of Days was seated;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head was like pure wool;
his throne was flashing fire;
its wheels were burning fire.

¹⁰ A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
thousand upon thousands served him,
and myriads upon myriads stood before him;
the council was seated,
and the books were opened.

¹¹ “I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

Several features of the text jump out at us right away. First, we know that the Ancient of Days is the God of Israel because the description of his throne as fiery and having wheels matches that of the vision of Ezekiel 1. Ezekiel's description of a humanoid figure on the throne is also consistent with Daniel 7 since the Ancient of Days is described in human terms (clothing, hair, head). Second, there are many thrones in heaven, not just one (“thrones were set up”).¹⁴⁷ The text is crystal clear that the God of Israel, the “Ancient of Days,” is seated on a throne, but there are an unspecified number of other thrones in God's heavenly throne room. Third, the plural thrones are occupied by the members of the divine council (“the council was seated”). Fourth, there appears to be a division in the council between those who sat to render judgment and “support staff” who ministered to the Ancient of Days. This harkens back to our earlier discussion about the tiers of the divine council hierarchy. Fifth, the divine council was meeting, with the Ancient of Days, to decide the fate of the beasts (kingdoms) of the world who had, were, or would subjugate Israel. Judgment is in fact pronounced, and the last beast is killed, while the others were allowed to live for a while, though their dominion was taken away.

The point of the vision in broad terms is that God and his council govern the affairs of humankind, specifically the rise and fall of nations. The High God and his council are in control, no matter what things look like on earth. After seeing the beast receive the death sentence in the council, Daniel's vision continued:

Daniel 7:13-14

- ¹³ “I saw in visions of the night,
and behold, with (or, upon)¹⁴⁸ the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
- ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.

There's a lot to unpack here. It's clear from the text that the Ancient of Days (God) and the “one like a son of man” are different characters in the scene. Far less clear is the importance of the description of the son of man. It is this description that compelled the two powers in heaven idea in Judaism—the notion that there were in fact, two Yahwehs.

“Son of man” is a fairly frequent phrase in the Old Testament. Ezekiel, for example, is called “son of man” dozens of times in the book of Ezekiel (e.g., Ezek. 2:1-8). The phrase simply means “human one,” and so Daniel 7:13 describes someone who appeared human coming on or with the clouds to the Ancient of Days. This is pretty straightforward. The key to grasping the reason this verse affected Jewish theology so profoundly is to understand the rest of the description, where this person was described as coming with/upon the clouds.

The Cloud Rider

The first thing we need to understand is the wider ancient context for the description. We've talked a good bit about Baal in the course of this book, especially how he was the chief rival to Yahweh in the hearts and minds of the Israelites at various points in their history. We've also noted how the prophets would at times take part of “Baal theology” found in ancient religious texts outside Israel, such the ancient literature of Ugarit, Israel's close neighbor to the north. Throughout the Ugaritic texts, Baal is repeatedly called “the one who rides the clouds,” or “the one who mounts the clouds.” The description became an official title of Baal, whom the entire ancient Near Eastern world considered a deity of rank. This is important—to ancient people all over the

Mediterranean, Israelite or not, the “one who rides the clouds” was a deity. There was no ambiguity.

This title shows up in various wordings in the Old Testament as a title of the God of Israel:

Isaiah 19:1 - An oracle concerning Egypt. Behold, Yahweh is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

Deut. 33:26 - “There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty.

Psalm 68:32-33 – ³² O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God; sing praises to the Lord, *Selah* ³³ to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens; behold, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.

Psalm 104:1-4 – ¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, ² covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent. ³ He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind; ⁴ he makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire.

Doing this makes sense. It’s part of the same literary strategy of the Israelite prophets we’ve seen before, where they take well-known material about a foreign god and attribute it to Yahweh in some way. The effect is to “displace” or snub the foreign god and hold up Yahweh as the deity who legitimately could hold the title. In our day and age, it would be akin to someone who voted for Al Gore in 2000 referring to Mr. Gore as “President Gore” in place of George W. Bush. On one level, it would be a gesture of contempt. On another, it would speak to a belief that Mr. Gore was the “real” president. So it was with the biblical writers. They would simultaneously dismiss Baal and put forth their own theology that Yahweh was the “real” god.

The lone exception to the pattern of using this unambiguous deity title of the God of Israel is Daniel 7:13. In Daniel 7 we see the God of Israel, on his familiar fiery throne with wheels (cf. Ezek. 1) already present before the “human one,” the “one like a son of man,” appears on the scene. It is this second figure that received the familiar deity title used of Yahweh in every other instance in the Old Testament. The implications were very clear to the rabbis—there are two deities, or two powers, in heaven. This was the theology of Judaism until after the beginning of Christianity. The New Testament references this two powers passage in a dramatic way to put forth Jesus as the incarnate Yahweh, and Judaism responded by declaring the idea heretical around the second century (the 100s) A.D., just after the passing of the twelve apostles.

The Kingdom Envisioned

Getting back to the flow of Daniel 7, notice that the son of man, this second deity who appeared in human form, received an everlasting kingdom, but only after the fourth beast was judged. It is also important to notice that verse 14 is a preview or summary of what is described in verses 15-28. These three observations are critical for situating verses 13-14 in the flow of what verses 15-28 describe.

Daniel 7:15-28

¹⁵ “As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. ¹⁶ I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things. ¹⁷ ‘These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. ¹⁸ But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.’ ¹⁹ “Then I desired to know the truth about the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet, ²⁰ and about the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn that came up and before which three of them fell, the horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke great things, and that seemed greater than its companions. ²¹ As I looked, this horn made war with the holy ones and prevailed over them, ²² until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the holy ones of the Most High, and the time came when the holy ones possessed the kingdom.

²³ “Thus he said: ‘As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces.

²⁴ As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them; he shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings.

²⁵ He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the holy ones of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law; and they shall be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time.

²⁶ But the council shall sit in judgment, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end.

²⁷ And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven

shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High;
his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey them.’

²⁸ “Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my color changed, but I kept the matter in my heart.”

The “kingdom talk” here in the context of a meeting of God and his council needs explanation. Specifically, everything seems to move toward the establishment of the everlasting kingdom of the Most High. Since this vision, like the dream of Daniel 2, is about four kingdoms, it is worth recalling when the everlasting kingdom of the Most High is mentioned in Daniel 2. Daniel 2 described Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a statue composed of diverse materials. A kingdom described as a stone “not made with human hands” struck the image at its feet—the symbol of the fourth kingdom—and destroyed it. Dan. 2:44 notes, “And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever.”

The everlasting kingdom of the Most High, then, begins during the era of the fourth kingdom. The same is true of Daniel 7, for it is the judgment of the fourth beast that paves the way for the inauguration of the kingdom of the Most High. In Dan. 7:14 this kingdom is said to be given to the deity son of man, and that it will have no end. But this verse is only a summary. The full range of events leading up to the reign of the son of man is unpacked a bit in the verses that follow.

We learn from Daniel 7:15-28 that the everlasting kingdom goes through several stages. Notice that right after the summary in verse 14 about the son of man receiving an everlasting kingdom, the divine being who interprets the scene for Daniel says in verse 18, “the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.” The phrase “holy ones,” as we have seen, is the Hebrew term *qedoshim* (or, *qedoshin* in the case of the Aramaic in Daniel 7). The term can refer to the members of the divine council in heaven (e.g., Psalm 89:5-7).¹⁴⁹ However, the term can also refer to people. Several times in Leviticus the people are referred to collectively as *qedoshim*, yet another description that produces the imagery that the earthly people of God mirror God’s council in heaven.¹⁵⁰ Psalm 16:3 refers to the *qedoshim* that are in the land, making it certain that the term can refer to people.

These “holy ones” in the land in Psalm 16:3 are of course God’s children, the Israelites, in the Holy Land of Israel. That might seem obvious, but it’s important in light of a verse we briefly glanced at in a previous chapter, Daniel 8:24. In this text we read that one of the kings of Greece, whom nearly all scholars identify as Antiochus Epiphanes, shall attack “the people of the holy ones.” Not unexpectedly, there is a tight relationship between the holy ones of the heavenly council and the holy ones on earth—God’s earthly family.

It's my view that what Daniel 7-8 are describing is the re-establishment of the kingdom of God in Israel through the remnant of God's earthly family that returned from Babylon after being exiled. This remnant, back in the Holy Land, begins to restore the kingdom out of the ashes, but is eventually assaulted again by the horn of Daniel 8 (Greece) and then the horn of Daniel 7 (Rome). This of course is what happened historically. During the time of the fourth beast (Rome) the kingdom of God would be kick-started again, but this time not by the Israelites, but by the coming of the son of man (Jesus in his incarnation). As we'll discuss in Chapter 22, the New Testament describes the kingdom of God being reborn at the *first* coming of Jesus when he began his earthly ministry, not the second coming. The beginning of Jesus' ministry marks the end of the rule of darkness and the beginning of the reclamation of the nations who are ruled by the other gods. The fourth beast would be dealt with in the wake of the divine council meeting described earlier in Daniel 7, setting the stage for the conditions of Daniel 7:27-28 to be met: when the earthly holy ones will rule with the son of man. Note in Daniel 7:27 that the kingdom is both given to *the people* of the holy ones of the Most High and "*his kingdom*" shall be forever, all the nations once disinherited and ruled by corrupt gods being made subject to *him* and to *his people*.¹⁵¹

The Gods Will Die Like Men

Way back in our first chapter we looked at Psalm 82's clear description of other, plural *elohim* in a divine council under the God of Israel. Things have come full circle now as far as the Old Testament is concerned. Psalm 82 tells us that, instead of governing in righteousness, the gods who received the disinherited nations after the Babel incident were corrupt. The last three verses of Psalm 82 speak to their fate when the God of Israel says:

- ⁶ I said, "You are gods (*elohim*),
sons of the Most High, all of you;
⁷ nevertheless, like men you shall die,
and fall like any prince."
⁸ Arise, O God, judge the earth;
for you shall inherit all the nations!

The rule of the gods will be ended when the Most High—and his people, who are his earthly council holy ones—judges the earth and reclaims the nations he once disinherited. At that time God will carry out the sentence against the *elohim*. We, of course, have yet to see this day. But we did get a glimpse, long ago in Galilee, and it is to that time our story now moves.

¹⁴⁵ See Chapter 9 for the first use of the phrase “two powers in heaven” and its association with Judaism in this book. The major scholarly work in this area is the book by Alan Segal (Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism; Brill, 1977). Segal’s book documents how the idea of two (good) powers in heaven was accepted in Judaism, and traces the teaching back to the third century BC. He then documents how it became a heresy for Judaism at around the second century AD. My own dissertation (2004) picked up where Segal left the backward trail, as I sought to trace the two powers idea back into the Old Testament and Israelite religion.

¹⁴⁶ Add bibliography here from reformed, covenantal, and dispensational traditions.

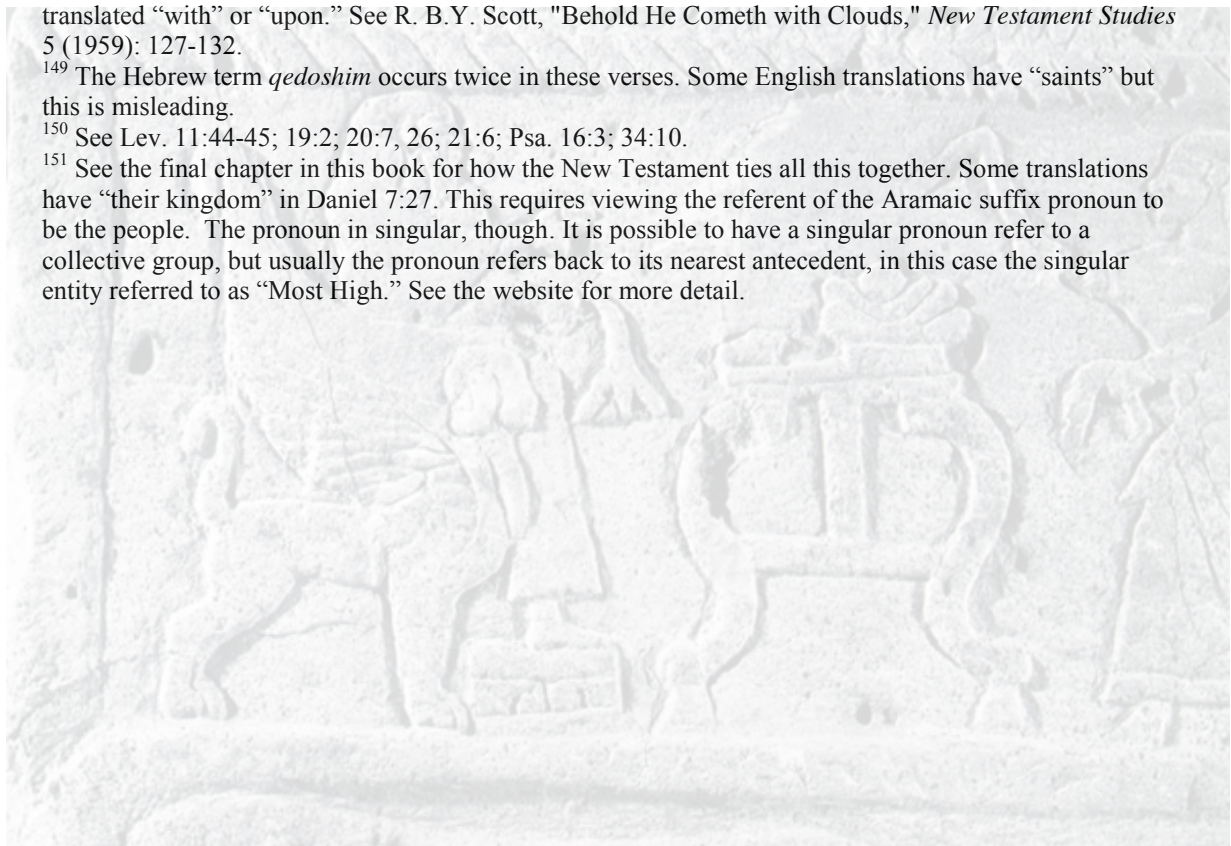
¹⁴⁷ The rabbis tried to argue that there were only two thrones—one for God and one for King David. This idea fails for a number of reasons, not the least of which that the human-divine figure in the scene (the son of man) is actually not seated. See www.themyththatistrue.com for more details.

¹⁴⁸ The work of R. B. Y. Scott has established that the Aramaic preposition used in Dan. 7:13 can be translated “with” or “upon.” See R. B. Y. Scott, “Behold He Cometh with Clouds,” *New Testament Studies* 5 (1959): 127-132.

¹⁴⁹ The Hebrew term *qedoshim* occurs twice in these verses. Some English translations have “saints” but this is misleading.

¹⁵⁰ See Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:6; Psa. 16:3; 34:10.

¹⁵¹ See the final chapter in this book for how the New Testament ties all this together. Some translations have “their kingdom” in Daniel 7:27. This requires viewing the referent of the Aramaic suffix pronoun to be the people. The pronoun in singular, though. It is possible to have a singular pronoun refer to a collective group, but usually the pronoun refers back to its nearest antecedent, in this case the singular entity referred to as “Most High.” See the website for more detail.



Chapter 22

The Human One

It's easy for us, sitting as we are on this side of the New Testament, to look back and see, however imperfectly, that the major themes of the Old Testament's cosmic narrative converge in Jesus. You might even ask yourself at this point in our study how the Jews of the first century could have missed who he was. The Word, the Name, the Angel, and Wisdom all point to a godhead, and when any of those figures is embodied as the second, now visible, Yahweh, we stand aghast at how the God-man Jesus, the miracle-worker from Galilee who tied his acts to Old Testament revelation, could be rejected and crucified. But before you or I are too hard on anyone, we need only recall that much of what you've read in this book escaped you and me in the past. It may look plain as day now, but that should only intensify the realization that we glossed right over a lot of things for years without ever knowing it. Even though we have the New Testament—in some respects a commentary on the Old Testament, the revelation Israelites had—we still missed an awful lot of what was given to us. This chapter will no doubt give you that same feeling, but it will also tie together some threads that have been running since we began our journey.

Jesus as Daniel's Son of Man, the Cloud-Rider

In the last chapter we learned that the Son of Man of Daniel 7 was, to the ancient Israelite, a second Yahweh figure—another version of the recurring theme of a deity figure in human form in Israel's faith. The term “son of man” in fact meant “human one.” This figure's role was tied to the restoration of the kingdom of God on earth. The Son of Man, the embodied Yahweh, would rule on earth forever, reclaiming the disinherited nations dominated by the corrupt sons of God.

What you may not realize is that “son of man” was the description most often used in the gospels for Jesus, *by Jesus himself*. Most of the time there's nothing explosive about Jesus' use of the term, though it is striking that Jesus apparently enjoyed referring to himself as “the human one”! On one occasion, though, the term is a telling claim by Jesus to be the embodied deity in Daniel 7—and was interpreted as such by his adversaries. In Matthew 26 we read:

⁵⁷ Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. ⁵⁸ And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. ⁵⁹ Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰ but they found none,

though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward ⁶¹ and said, “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’ ” ⁶² And the high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” ⁶³ But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” ⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.”

In what seems like a cryptic answer to a very clear question, Jesus tells Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, that he is the second Yahweh. The reaction is swift and unyielding—anyone who claims to be Yahweh is a blasphemer and deserves to die. Jesus’ answer provides the high priest with the accusation he needs for a death sentence, but gives us a clear testimony to Jesus as God incarnate. Unlike the claims of popular writers in our day, such as Dan Brown in *The DaVinci Code*, the idea that Jesus was God in flesh did not originate in 325 A.D. at the Council of Nicea under pressure from Emperor Constantine. Hundreds of years earlier Jesus is marked as the human one, the Son of Man of Daniel 7, the second Yahweh.

This is hardly the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is identified with the second Yahweh of the Old Testament. We’re just getting started.

Jesus as the Word

One of the most familiar passages in the New Testament is John 1. The first eighteen verses read:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ”) ¹⁶ And from

his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Most readers have probably had their pastor or someone else explain to them that his passage was talking about Jesus. That's true, of course, but I'm guessing that many of you were like me when I first saw this passage and heard that claim. The only reason I could (sort of) buy it was verse fourteen, where the Word was made flesh. Looking back at Chapter 9, though, which detailed that Yahweh himself was the Word who appeared visibly and even physically to patriarchs and prophets, makes John's language here much more comprehensible. Of course no one has seen the Father—he is the invisible Yahweh, undetectable by human eyes. Yahweh had to be veiled, to become visible or embodied, for us to know him and to be shielded from his essence.

As in the Old Testament, it is the Word, the second Yahweh, who was the agent of creation. As in the Old Testament, where the second Yahweh is at the Father's side as Wisdom, John 1:18 tells us that “the only God, who is at the Father's side” is the one who makes the Father known.¹⁵² The word “only” in that statement is the word *monogenes*, which we considered briefly toward the end of Chapter Three. We saw there that the word is often translated “only begotten” but actually means “unique.” Think about that with respect to John 1:18. The unique God at God the Father's side makes God the Father known. By definition “unique” speaks of one, and we would expect the unique God to *be* God the Father, not the one beside the Father. This is comprehensible, though, once we realize that both were Yahweh, but one was the invisible Yahweh while the other was the visible Yahweh, embodied for our understanding and protection. As Jesus told the apostle Philip, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?” (John 14:9).

Jesus as Possessor of the Name

As with the Son of Man and the Word, the New Testament applies the concept of “the Name, who is Yahweh” to Jesus. In John 17, while awaiting his betrayal by Judas, Jesus prays:

17: ¹ When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. ⁶ “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to

know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled . . . ²⁰ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us,¹⁵³ so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

The key phrase here is that Jesus was “given the Name of the Father.” Now, we know that Jesus was not called Yahweh by the people of his day. The heralding angel who told Mary she was to bear the Son of God told her specifically to name the child “Jesus.” But let’s think about this against the backdrop of the Old Testament notion of the Name—the very Glory-presence of Yahweh—being embodied *in* the Angel, the second Yahweh. Consider an oft-repeated parallel thought from the same gospel: “. . . the Father is *in* me and I am *in* the Father” (John 10:38).¹⁵⁴ For John, to have the Name is to have the Father. The concept is the same. And when Jesus says he has “kept them in your name,” he means he has kept those the Father gave to him *by means of* God’s power and presence—the Name, now embodied in Jesus.¹⁵⁵

But was “the Name” ever used as a substitution for “Jesus”? Was “Jesus” equated with the Name as the Name was equated with Yahweh in the Old Testament? We can answer in the affirmative on the strength of several passages.¹⁵⁶

Acts 5:40-42

⁴⁰ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

At the very least, the expression here reveals the same mode of thinking as in the Old Testament—that the God we follow can be referred to by the phrase “the Name.” And since the people using the wording here were Jews, the phrase has a distinct Old Testament flavor. And it is clear that the Name for whom the apostles suffered was Jesus.¹⁵⁷

Romans 10:9-13

⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord” will be saved.”

The important thing to note here is that the quotation of verse 13 comes from Joel 2:32. In that Old Testament text we read: “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD (Yahweh) shall be saved.” The apostle Paul deftly links “confessing Jesus is Lord” in verse 9 with the statement of the Old Testament prophet. This happens many times, especially in Paul’s writings.¹⁵⁸ The Name and Yahweh were interchanged in Israelite theology, so that trusting in “the Name of Yahweh” meant trusting in Yahweh. Likewise, trusting in the name of the Lord, who is Yahweh in the Old Testament quotation, is the same as confessing Jesus as Lord.

Jesus as Wisdom

There are several instances in the New Testament where Jesus is identified with the second Yahweh who is the Wisdom of the Old Testament. Paul explicitly states that Jesus is the “Wisdom of God” (I Cor. 1:24). It’s possible that Paul meant only to say that Jesus was God’s “wise plan” to outwit Satan,¹⁵⁹ but I would suggest what Paul says should be understood in the context of other apostolic sayings about Jesus and Wisdom.

The most striking and obvious instance of an identification of Jesus and Wisdom is Luke 11:49-51. This text refers to the Wisdom of God in terms now familiar to us, terms of personhood. As you read, ask yourself who is speaking in the underlined portion:

⁴⁶ And he [Jesus] said, “Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. ⁴⁷ Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. ⁴⁸ So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹ Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ ⁵⁰ so that the blood of

all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation,⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.

The passage is pretty straightforward. We know the context well enough to realize that Jesus is the speaker, in this case once again railing on the hypocrisy of his enemies. But in verse 49 Jesus suddenly interjects another speaker, the Wisdom of God, who proceeds to say in the first person, “I sent you prophets and apostles....” Jesus does this in such a way as to create the impression that it was *Wisdom* who sent the prophets and apostles, something we know from both the Old and New Testament that *God the Father* did (e.g., Isa. 6:8; 10:6; Jer 1:7; I Cor. 1:28). Jesus is explicitly equating Wisdom and God the Father.

Is Jesus confused? Is the gospel writer being careless? No way. It’s deliberate, and sets up a wonderful illustration of the theological value of having more than one gospel. Check out the *same passage* in Matthew 23. Note the underlining carefully, and remember the speaker is the same as before—Jesus:

²⁹ [And Jesus said,] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous,³⁰ saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town,³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Did you catch it? In this gospel, Matthew naturally has Jesus as the speaker who is giving the Pharisees and scribes a tongue-lashing. But *whereas the gospel of Luke had Jesus making Wisdom a second speaker, Matthew puts the very words of Wisdom, who has assumed the identity of God the Father in Luke, into Jesus’ own mouth!* The effect of this in the early church was electric: Luke and Matthew, through a written tag-team effort, identified Jesus as God’s co-creator, Wisdom, who was identified as Yahweh, the God of Israel. To those readers who knew their Old Testament well, the implication was obvious: Jesus is the second Yahweh figure. He is Wisdom!

The writer of Hebrews telegraphs the same Wisdom-Jesus equation to his readers. In Hebrews 1:1-3 we read “¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our

fathers by the prophets,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.³ He is the radiance [apaugasma] of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

The Greek word *apaugasma* occurs only here in the entire New Testament. It also occurs in only one place in the Septuagint. It is very rare. The first chapter of Hebrews is known for its quotations of the Old Testament. The writer is addressing Jews (“God spoke to *our fathers* by the prophets”; Heb 1:1) and so he uses sacred literature familiar to them as Jews to build his case for the messianic lordship of Jesus. The passage in the Septuagint where the word *apaugasma* occurs is actually from a book outside the canon that many Jews also considered authoritative. It’s a book we’ve looked into before: *The Wisdom of Solomon*. Hebrews 1:3 draws on *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:22, where *apaugasma*—the radiance of God’s glory—is none other than Wisdom: “For she is a reflection [apaugasma] of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.” For the writer of Hebrews, Wisdom was Jesus.

Jesus as the Angel of Yahweh

Jesus and the Angel who is the visible Yahweh in the Old Testament are identified by virtue of Jesus being the one in whom God’s name is in the new era of the New Testament. Aside from that connection, though, it is possible in light of Jude 5,¹⁶⁰ which says:

Now I desire to remind you (even though you have been fully informed of these facts once for all that Jesus, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, later destroyed those who did not believe.

This short verse in Jude credits Jesus as delivering the Israelites from Egypt. The reference here is to Exodus 23:20-23, where the Angel of the Lord, in whom is the Name, goes before Israel in the procession out of Egypt. The reference to destruction could be to the death of the Egyptians, but it is more likely post-Sinai, where judgments of enemies of Yahweh during the wilderness wanderings resulted in destruction of unbelievers. The reference might also be to other judgments that occurred after the exodus, such as the abandonment of Israel by the Angel of the Lord in Judges 2, the destruction of people in the plague of II Samuel 24, or Israel’s enemies the Assyrians by the Angel of the Lord (II Chron. 32). At any rate, the identification here, along with all the other connections between Jesus and the visible Yahweh, is striking.

Jesus as Lord of the Divine Council

That the New Testament ties Jesus to the second (visible) Yahweh figure of the Old Testament is quite clear. As the second Yahweh, the one who “is but isn’t” the Father-Yahweh, it should also be clear that Jesus is superior to the divine council. The council members were created beings and were at the service of God. Keeping this in mind helps us understand one of the more enigmatic dialogues Jesus had with certain adversarial

Jews. In fact, it helps us identify that episode as a powerful statement of the deity of Jesus.

I'm speaking here of Jesus' quotation of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34-35. Psalm 82, of course, is the central passage on the divine council in the Old Testament. To get the full context, let's take a look at John 10, beginning in verse 22:

²² And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter. ²³ And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch. ²⁴ Then came the Jews round about him, and said to him, "How long are you going to make us doubt? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." ²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you believed not: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me. ²⁶ But you believe not, because you are not of my sheep, as I said to you. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: ²⁸ And I give to them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone pluck them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who gave *them* to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and my Father are one." ³¹ Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him. ³² Jesus answered them, "Many good works have I shown you from my Father; for which of those works do you stone me?" ³³ The Jews answered him, saying, "For a good work we would not stone you; but for blasphemy; and because that you, being a man, make yourself God."

To this point, a few things are crystal clear: (1) Jesus says he had told the Jews that he was Messiah; (2) he identifies himself with Yahweh; and (3) they understood his statement about being one with Yahweh as a claim to be God.¹⁶¹ Instead of making any effort to correct their perception or deny that he was God, Jesus proceeds to take them to Psalm 82:

³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law: 'I said, you are gods?'" ³⁵ If he [God] called them gods, to whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; ³⁶ how do you say of him whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world, 'You blaspheme!' because I said, I am the Son of God? ³⁷ If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. ³⁸ But if I do, though you don't believe me, believe the works: that you may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him." ³⁹ Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand, ⁴⁰ And went away again beyond Jordan into the place where John at first baptized; and there he abode. ⁴¹ And many resorted unto him, and said, John did no miracle: but all things that John spoke of this man were true. ⁴² And many believed on him there.

You may recall that, way back in Chapter 1, I noted that many scholars—and practically all evangelical scholars—think that the *elohim* of Psalm 82 are human beings, namely the elders of Israel. I reject that view for the reasons outlined in Chapter 1.¹⁶² Since so many see the *elohim* in Psalm 82 as humans, it shouldn't be surprising that a large number of scholars—and most, if not all, evangelicals—think Jesus is applying this quotation to human beings, in this case, the Jews who were challenging him. In other words, most interpreters would say Jesus is saying, "Look guys, you shouldn't have any trouble with

me calling myself God when your own Scriptures call other people gods.” I don’t think this is the point of the quotation at all.

Any interpretation of Jesus’ quotation here must incorporate the context of what else Jesus says in John 10 and make sense doing so. Jesus has declared himself to be one with the Father, which the Jews interpret (correctly) as a claim to be God. Why would Jesus seek to disabuse them of that idea when it was true? The majority interpretation of this passage has Jesus in effect muting that claim (“I can call myself God just like you guys can”). Why would Jesus “correct” their perception by backing away from a claim to be God when he was God incarnate? This view gets more muddled when we notice that after he quotes the passage Jesus adds “the Father is in me, and I in him,” and then the Jews try to seize him again! Could the rest of the Jews say that? Was Jesus affirming, then muting, then re-affirming his identification with the Father? Couldn’t he make up his mind? Were the Jews angry with him because he was indecisive? Hardly—they knew he was claiming to be God, which raises the issue of how to better interpret his quotation of Psalm 82:6.

Naturally, in light of this book’s first chapter, I believe that the *elohim* of Psalm 82 were not human. That understanding of Psalm 82 leads me to argue here that Jesus was in fact asserting his own deity—and his own status as Lord of the divine council. Let me explain.

The human *elohim* view that I reject derives from two assumptions brought to the text: (1) that it is required by the impossibility of there being other *elohim*; and (2) that the phrase “to whom the word of God came” in John 10:35 *refers to the Jews who received the law at Sinai* –i.e., the Pharisees’ forefathers. Chapter 1 dispenses with the first assumption, so let’s go after the second.

First we need to come to terms with what is meant by “the word of God” and who it is that receives that word *in the original Psalm 82:6-7*. Here it is:

6 “I said, ‘you are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you’.

7 Therefore you shall die as humans do, and you shall fall as one of the princes.

The speaker (“I”) in the passage is the God of Israel, the God who is standing in the divine council in 82:1 among the other *elohim* to accuse them of corruption. God announces in 82:6 that the *elohim* of the council are his sons, but because of their corruption (vv. 2-5), they will be stripped of their immortality. I believe that when Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6 he wanted his audience to remember who the speaker was (God) and who the recipients were (the *elohim* of the divine council). He wanted his audience to recollect, “yeah, that’s right, there are other *elohim* and those *elohim* are the sons of the God of Israel.” Jesus was *not* asking his Jewish audience to consider themselves as the *elohim* of Psalm 82:6. We, as modern interpreters, have inserted that idea into the passage and, consequently, into the minds of those who were listening to Jesus.

To illustrate the difference in the views:

Common Interpretation / Jesus' strategy assumes <i>elohim</i> are human	My View / Jesus' strategy assumes <i>elohim</i> are divine
The "word of God that came" = revelation from God at Sinai. ¹⁶³	The "word of God that came" = the utterance itself in Psalm 82:6 – the pronouncement from God
"to whom the word of God came" = the Israelites at Sinai, or the Jews generally.	"to whom the word of God came" = the <i>elohim</i> of the divine council in 82:1
Result = the Jews are the "sons of the Most High" and to the <i>elohim</i> . Jesus can call himself an <i>elohim</i> because all Jews can. There is therefore no claim to deity.	Result = The Jews are not the <i>elohim</i> of Psalm 82. Rather, Jesus reminds his audience that there are other <i>elohim</i> --heavenly <i>elohim</i> of the divine council who are God's sons in 82:6. He wants the Jews to remember that God is not the only <i>elohim</i> and God has sons.

The logical question at this point is how Jesus' effort to get the Jews to remember there are plural *elohim* of any help to Jesus as he responds to the Jews who object to his claim to be one with the Father, the invisible Yahweh. It seems that the view I am proposing leaves Jesus saying, "Hey, there are many sons of God, so I can call myself the son of God." This wouldn't amount to claim of equality with God, since the sons of God were created and inferior to Yahweh.

You'd be right if you thought this—but only if you don't factor in the context of Jesus' quotation. On one hand, just reminding the Jews that God had heavenly sons would have been sufficient to win the argument over the right to call himself a son of God. But Jesus went beyond that. Since he says "I and the Father are one" before he quotes Psalm 82:6, he was actually claiming to be the crown prince or co-regent of the council—the one son who shares the throne! This is why, elsewhere in John, Jesus is the *unique* son of God (the monogenes).¹⁶⁴ And his subsequent statement that, "the Father is in me and I in him," hearkened back to the invisible Yahweh being "in" the Old Testament co-regent, the Angel of Yahweh (Exod. 23:20-23). He was claiming to be the embodied Yahweh, Lord of the council. It's no wonder they tried to seize him.

As amazing as it was to see the concept of a godhead in the Old Testament—in effect, the Jewish Bible—it's even more amazing to realize what the connection to Jesus really means. It's one thing to have God come to human beings in the Old Testament through visible means, a mediating figure who at times was an embodied man. It's quite another to have the second Yahweh be born of a woman as completely human, with all the limitations and vulnerabilities that entails. The incarnation of God in Jesus was the ultimate attempt by Yahweh to meet with us and experience us, and to have us experience him. Anyone who has seen Jesus has seen the Father. But this was also more than an

extended visitation. It was all about overcoming the debacle in Eden, seed of the *nachash*, and the disinheriting of the nations.

¹⁵² The wording of this verse is not the same in every manuscript of the Greek New Testament. It occurs in some of the oldest manuscripts we have.

¹⁵³ The idea of believers being “in” the Father and “in” Christ “just as” the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father, relates to the fact that it is the Christian’s destiny to become divine – to be like Christ—because believers are the “sons of God” / “children of God” (cf. I John 3:1-3). This will be the subject of another chapter.

¹⁵⁴ See John 14:10-12, 20 and 2 Cor. 5:18.

¹⁵⁵ This is not the Gnostic notion that the man Jesus “became” God or received God at his baptism. That cannot be the point because of verse 24, where Jesus says that the Father loved him “before the foundation of the world.”

¹⁵⁶ I have not included Jesus’ “I AM” statements here. See the next chapter.

¹⁵⁷ As C.K. Barrett notes, “The Jews used *יהוה* to avoid saying *God*; the Christians took this up for Jesus; therefore they thought of Jesus as God” (C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles; The Acts of the Apostles* [2 v.: T&T Clark International, 2004], 301).

¹⁵⁸ Footnote the book by Capes here.

¹⁵⁹ And if that’s the case, the Pauline doctrine of Jesus’ deity does not depend on this verse.

¹⁶⁰ The wording of this verse is not the same in every manuscript of the Greek New Testament. It occurs in some of the oldest manuscripts we have.

¹⁶¹ Mormons and Jehovah’s witnesses would translate the end of this verse, “. . . you, being a man, make yourself a god,” albeit for different theological reasons. Those in either camp who work in Greek would argue that the Greek word for “God” here (*theos*) lacks the definite article, and so the indefinite “a god” is correct because of Greek grammar and syntax. This objection does not hold water, as a syntactical search for *theos* as a grammatical complement unpreceded by a definite article shows. For this technical discussion and the results of this search, see www.themyththatistrue.com or www.michaelsheiser.com/UFO

¹⁶² There are other sound reasons for rejecting this view, but they are of a technical nature. See www.themyththatistrue.com.

¹⁶³ Notice that there is no reference to Sinai (or any mountain) in Psalm 82. The idea that the “word” here is the law has to be supplied.

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter 1 for the discussion on the *monogenes* son (usually translated imprecisely as, “only begotten”).

Chapter 23

Pre-Eminent Domain

We often think of the commencement the ministry and mission of Jesus as something quiet and covert. Not so. A day in the ministry of the incarnate Yahweh was a spiritual assault on the forces of darkness to reclaim what rightfully belonged to him, his Father the invisible Yahweh, and those human beings who were part of the divine council family. We call it the kingdom of God. To Jesus it was holy war; a spiritual Special-Ops mission.

Sadly, the intensity Jesus' words and acts is frequently hidden in plain sight. Space prevents going through all the gospels and the ministry of Jesus like we could. We'll look at three episodes in this chapter, and then focus on the crucifixion and resurrection in the next. By now you've had your senses tuned by the cosmic backdrop of the divine council worldview of the Old Testament. It's a good thing, too. The gospels are far more than a boring point-to-point travelogue. Modern Bible teaching has just made it seem that way. Consider this chapter a cure.

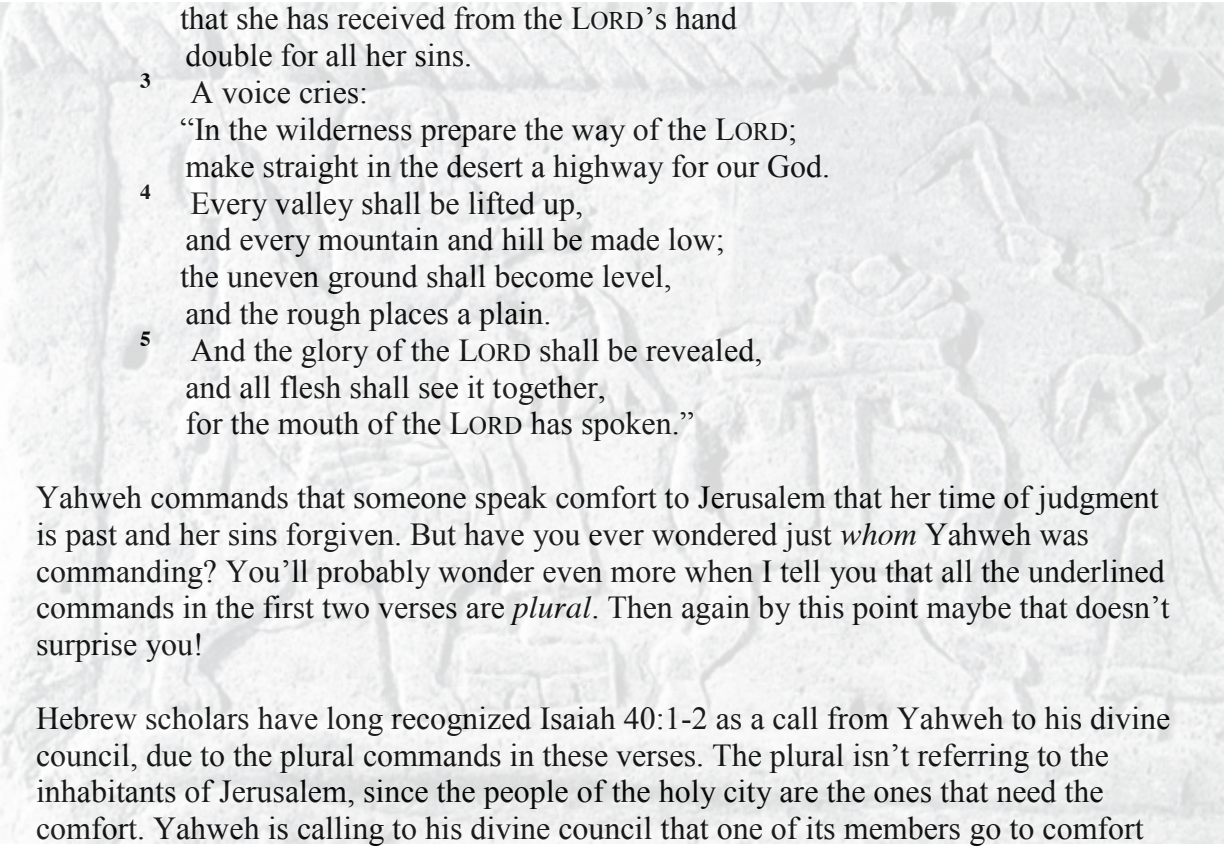
Who Will Go For Us?

From the moment Jesus came on the public scene as the messianic Servant of whom Isaiah wrote, the kingdom of darkness came under assault. We've all read about Jesus' baptism before, perhaps dozens of times—but we have likely missed the context for it. John's gospel (John 1:19-23, 29-31) sets it up this way:

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." . . . ²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel."

It's pretty startling that John the Baptist would quote Isaiah 40 and identify himself with the anonymous voice of Isa. 40:3 that heralded the coming of Yahweh. After all, that would amount to an identification of Yahweh with Jesus, the one whom John explicitly said he was announcing. But if we go back to Isaiah 40, things get even more interesting.

Isaiah 40:1-5

- 
- ¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
³ A voice cries:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Yahweh commands that someone speak comfort to Jerusalem that her time of judgment is past and her sins forgiven. But have you ever wondered just *whom* Yahweh was commanding? You'll probably wonder even more when I tell you that all the underlined commands in the first two verses are *plural*. Then again by this point maybe that doesn't surprise you!

Hebrew scholars have long recognized Isaiah 40:1-2 as a call from Yahweh to his divine council, due to the plural commands in these verses. The plural isn't referring to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, since the people of the holy city are the ones that need the comfort. Yahweh is calling to his divine council that one of its members go to comfort Jerusalem—specifically, to announce that the time of salvation and forgiveness has arrived. Just as the message of “repent or else” came in the presence of the divine council back in the famous scene of Isaiah 6, where Isaiah is present in Yahweh's throne room, where council holds session, so it is that the announcement of pardon is issued in the presence of the council. Think about what is said in Isaiah 6:8

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.”

After the call goes out, an anonymous voice responds:

- ³ A voice cries:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
- ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together.
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

The anonymous voice that brings forth the message is somewhat reminiscent of 1 Kings 22, the divine council scene where the death of Ahab has been decreed, and then God leaves it up to council members to get the job done. A member of the council steps forward and announces the plan. Israel’s exile is over. Yahweh will return to his own disinherited Israel, a people held captive by one of the nations disinherited at Babel, before there was an Israel. The earth will never be the same, and all flesh will see it!

Amazingly, the Gospel of John casts John the Baptist in the role of the anonymous voice. Anyone familiar with the divine council context of Isaiah 40 would instantly recognize what is implied. Yahweh’s divine council is now in session. Long-laid plans in the divine war room are now to be enacted. God is commissioning John the Baptist to announce the arrival of the visible Yahweh.

Not only is John the Baptist commissioned in a manner consistent with “standing in the council,” but the Yahweh who comes on the scene bringing salvation is the visible, incarnate Yahweh—Jesus. The pattern of divine commissioning holds true for the greatest prophetic figure, the prophet “like unto Moses” (Deut. 18:15-18).

John 1:29-34

²⁹ The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

Matthew 3:13-17 makes it even more dramatic:

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is

fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him;¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

The New Testament story, then, begins with a dramatic re-visitation of Yahweh’s call to the divine council to send someone to make way for Yahweh—the visible Yahweh—who is on a mission to redeem his children. But that was only half the task.

Holy War

Incredibly, the mission of Jesus was not only for the children of Israel, the family Yahweh created after consigning the existing nations to the dominion of lesser gods at Babel. The coming of the incarnate Yahweh *was for reclaiming those nations as well*. But the gods of darkness were not going to surrender their domains without a fight—and the battle began so quickly Jesus barely had time to dry off.

The gospel writers tell us the event that immediately followed Jesus’ baptism was his journey into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil at the direction of the Holy Spirit (Matt 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1-13). Think about that. The wilderness was territory outside the holy ground of Israel. It was one of the places where Moses and Joshua encountered giant clans. It was where Israelites believed “desert demons,” including Azazel, were thought to inhabit. The Azazel material is especially telling, since, as I noted in the chapter on the Day of Atonement, Jewish practice of that ritual in Jesus’ day included driving the goat “for Azazel” into the desert outside Jerusalem and pushing it over a cliff so it could not return. The wilderness was a place associated with the demonic. And this was no exception.

You might wonder why the Spirit compelled Jesus to go into the desert to face the Devil. Jesus’ concluding retort to Satan makes the answer clear: “be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve’” (Matt. 4:10). The point was not that God needed to see if Jesus was up to the task, but to root the episode in the context of the whole of the Old Testament story: the battle of Yahweh vs. the gods and who was loyal to whom.

The first temptation of Jesus was that Satan tried to entice Jesus into satisfying his hunger by turning stones to bread. The problem of hunger was, of course, an issue in Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness on the way to Canaan. Jesus responds by quoting Deut. 8:3, which reads in context, “And he [Yahweh] humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh.” His point was that his loyalty was to the invisible Yahweh; he would obey no other. This is also apparent from Jesus’ words elsewhere about his mission: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). The second temptation is like the first. Satan dares Jesus to jump from the

top of the temple to prove he was the son of God, whom God's angels would protect. Jesus quotes Deut. 6:16, which again is in the context of obedience to Yahweh alone: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. You shall diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his testimonies and his statutes, which he has commanded you" (Deut. 6:16-17).

The ultimate temptation comes last, and hits directly at Jesus' ultimate mission—to reclaim all that is Yahweh's:

"Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me'" (Matt 4:8-9)

Satan offered Jesus the nations that had been disinherited by Yahweh at Babel. As the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31), the offer was not a hollow one. But accepting it meant acknowledging that Satan's permission was needed to gain the nations. Jesus' answer is clear: Yahweh will not regain the nations because they are Satan's to give; rather, He will *take* them back by his own means. The work of Christ was that means, and Jesus remains loyal to his Father.

Immediately following this confrontation, Jesus "returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee" where he preached in the region's synagogues and was rejected by those in his home town of Nazareth (Luke 4:14-15). Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus moved out of Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum (Matt. 4:12-16). At Capernaum he began his ministry with a simple but appropriate message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). Jesus then does two things: calls his first disciples: Peter, Andrew, James, and John and heals a demon-possessed man (Mark 1:16-28; Luke 4:31-5:11). Let the holy war begin.

It might sound hard to believe, but this event is first time in the entire Bible we ever read about a demon being cast out of a person. No such event is ever recorded in the Old Testament. The defeat of demons, falling on the heels of Jesus' victory over Satan's temptations, marks the beginning of the re-establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus himself made this connection absolutely explicit: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). And since the lesser *elohim* over the nations are cast as demons in the Old Testament (Deut. 32:17) the implications for our study are clear: the ministry of Jesus marked the beginning of repossession of the nations and defeat of their *elohim*.

Following Luke's account of what happened next, Jesus preaches, heals, and casts out other demons after this initial exorcism. He also gathers more disciples. In Luke 9 Jesus gathers his twelve disciples together and gives them power and authority over the demons, sending them out to proclaim the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1-6).

As if the intention wasn't clear enough, in the next chapter Jesus does something dramatic to announce to all who understood what happened at Babel—which includes the

demonic *elohim* of the nations—what was really happening: “Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come” (Luke 10:1). Jesus sent out *seventy* disciples. The number is not accidental.¹⁶⁵ It is the number of nations listed in Genesis 10 that were dispossessed at Babel. The seventy “return with joy” (Luke 10:17) and announce to Jesus, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” Jesus’ response is electric: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). The implications are clear: Jesus’ ministry is the beginning of the end for Satan and the gods of the nations. The great reversal is underway.

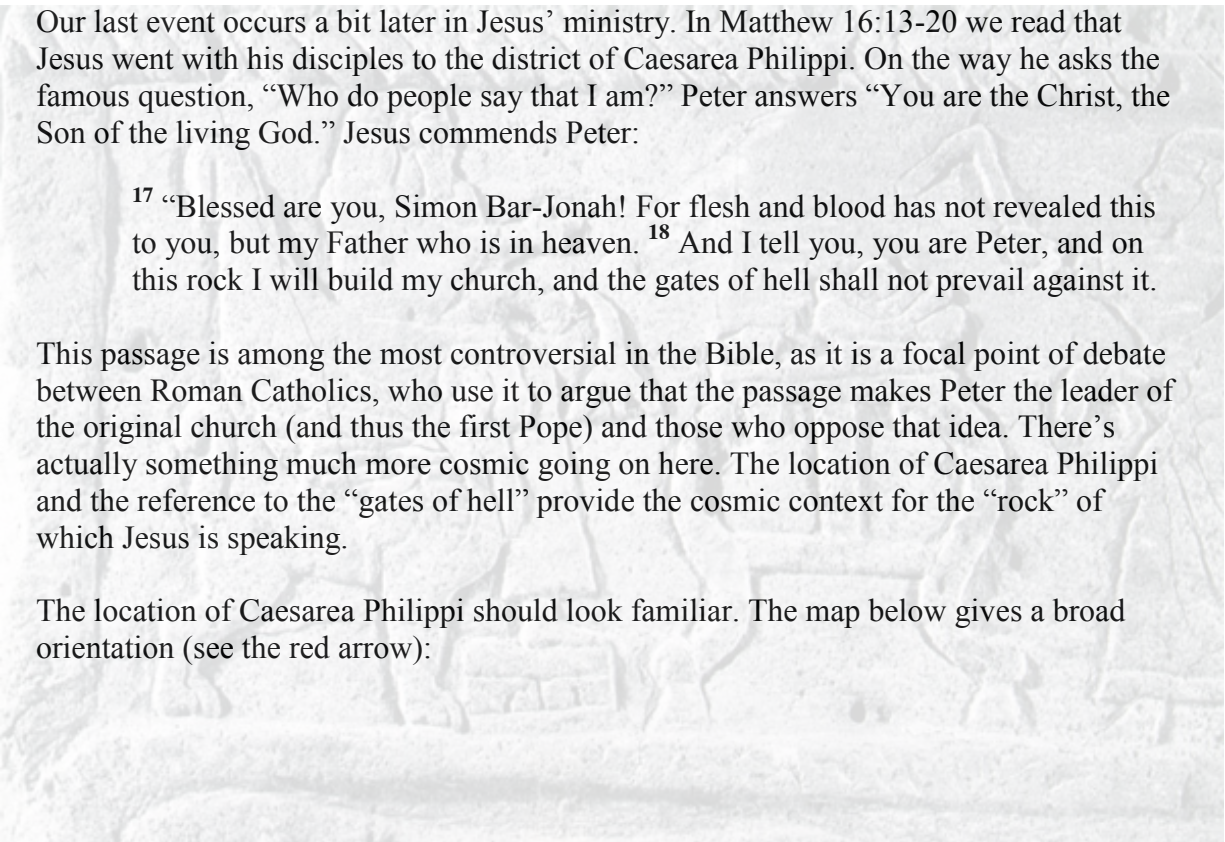
Cosmic Geography’s Ground Zero: The Gates of Hell

Our last event occurs a bit later in Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew 16:13-20 we read that Jesus went with his disciples to the district of Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asks the famous question, “Who do people say that I am?” Peter answers “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus commends Peter:

¹⁷ “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

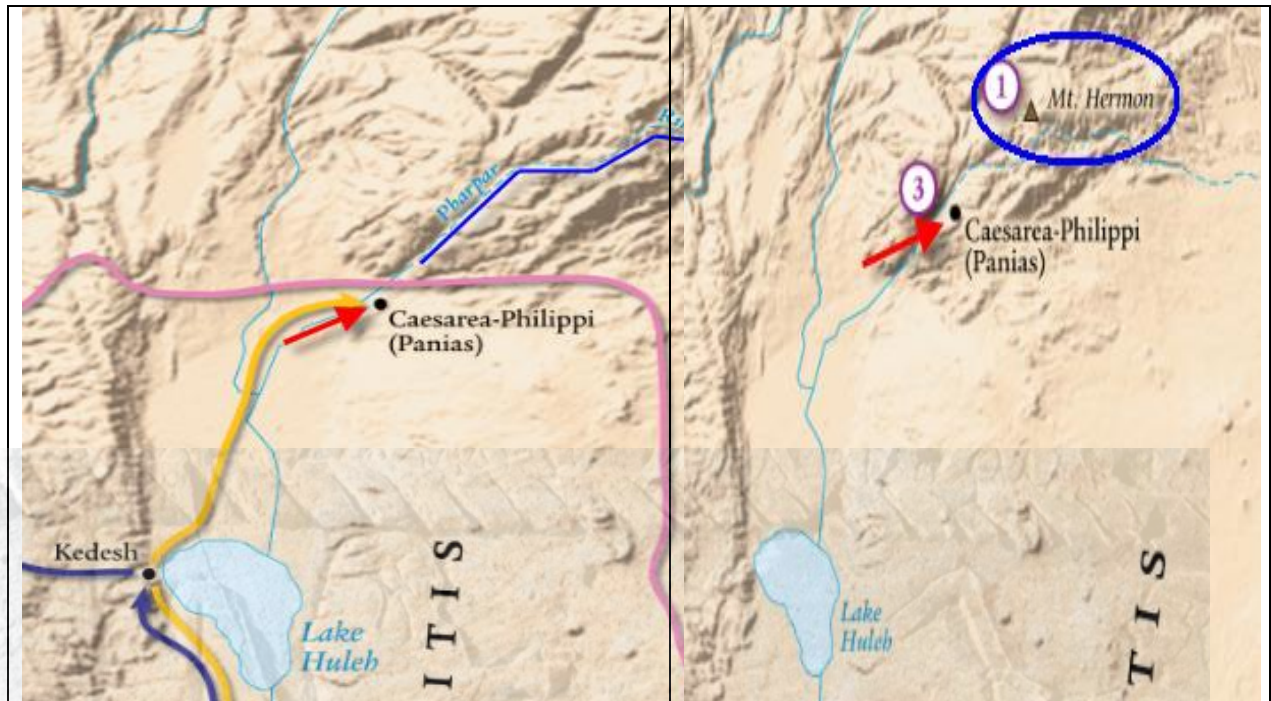
This passage is among the most controversial in the Bible, as it is a focal point of debate between Roman Catholics, who use it to argue that the passage makes Peter the leader of the original church (and thus the first Pope) and those who oppose that idea. There’s actually something much more cosmic going on here. The location of Caesarea Philippi and the reference to the “gates of hell” provide the cosmic context for the “rock” of which Jesus is speaking.

The location of Caesarea Philippi should look familiar. The map below gives a broad orientation (see the red arrow):

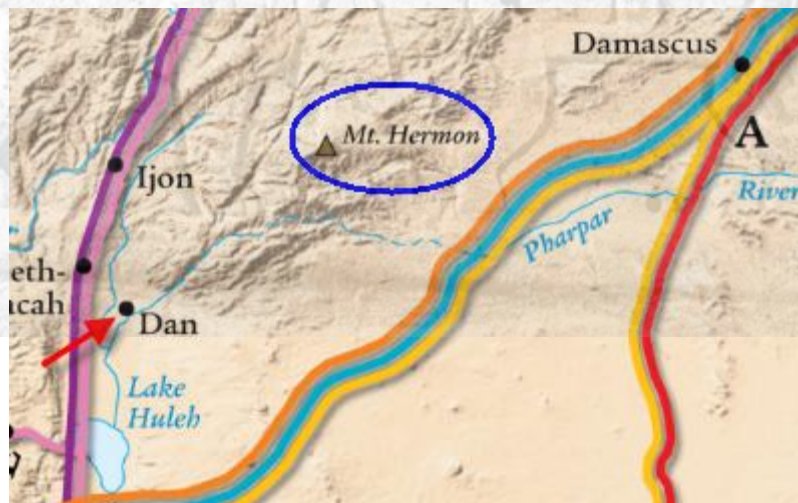




In the close-up on the left, note that Caesarea Philippi is adjacent to the Pharpar River. The close-up on the right, again noting the geography and the Pharpar River, we see exactly where Jesus was when he said this:



Caesarea Philippi was located just north of Old Testament Dan, which, you recall from Chapters 7 and 14 was the Old Testament “gates of hell” in the region of Bashan, the place of the serpent.”¹⁶⁶



Things hadn’t changed much by Jesus’ day, at least in terms of spiritual control. You may have noticed on these maps that Caesarea Philipp was also called “Panias.” The early church historian Eusebius notes: “until today the mount in front of Panias and Lebanon is known as Hermon and it is respected by nations as a sanctuary”¹⁶⁷ Panias is Arabic for the Greek Banias. The site was famous in the ancient world as a center of the worship of

Pan and for a temple to the high god Zeus, considered in Jesus' day to be incarnate in Augustus Caesar.¹⁶⁸ A more recent authority gives us a few more details:

More than twenty temples have been surveyed on Mt. Hermon and its environs. This is an unprecedented number in comparison with other regions of the Phoenician coast. They appear to be the ancient cult sites of the Mt. Hermon population and represent the Canaanite/Phoenician concept of open-air cult centers dedicated, evidently, to the celestial gods.

The celestial gods take our minds back to the "host of heaven," the sons of God who were put in authority over the nations at Babel (Deut 32:8-9) who were not to be worshipped by Israelites (Deut. 4:19-20; 17:3; 29:25).

The basis for Catholicism's contention that the church is built on Peter's leadership is that his name (Greek: Petros; Aramaic: Cephas) means "rock" (Greek: *petra*; Aramaic: *kepha*'). For sure there is word play going on in Peter's confession, but I would suggest there is also an important double entendre: the "rock" refers to the mountain location at where Jesus makes the statement. Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, at this place. Jesus in return tells Peter that on "this rock" (this *mountain*—Mount Hermon) he will build his church—and the "gates of hell" will not prevail against it. We often think of Jesus' "gates of hell" comment in terms of the church holding off Satan and his demons in a defensive mode. This isn't correct. Gates are defensive structures, not offensive weapons. Jesus begins at ground zero in the cosmic geography of both testaments to announce the great reversal. It is the gates of hell that are under assault—and they will *not* hold up against the church, which will be built over Satan's tomb.

It's hard to imagine, but the conflict ratchets up one more notch after Peter's confession. Mount Hermon wasn't just linked to Bashan, Dan, the demonic *elohim*, and the giant clans. It was the place where, in Jewish literature such as the book of *1 Enoch*, where the sons of God of Genesis 6:1-4 came in rebellion against Yahweh. Jesus has one more statement to make.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that the next event in the ministry of Jesus after Peter's confession was the Transfiguration. Mark 9:2-8 reads:

² And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵ And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." ⁸ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

In early church tradition, the location of the mount of transfiguration was believed by many to be Mount Tabor. The earliest witness to this tradition is the 4th century A.D.¹⁶⁹ The gospels themselves give no name, and so the tradition has no biblical precedent. Mount Hermon is also much higher than Tabor (8,500 feet vs. 1,843 feet),¹⁷⁰ which would fit better with the description of a “high mountain” by Mark (and in Matthew 17:1). Some scholars still hold to the Tabor identification, but many have come to agree that the close proximity of Caesarea Philippi to Mount Hermon and the symbolic-religious associations that relationship entails make Mount Hermon the logical choice for the Transfiguration.¹⁷¹

The imagery is striking. On the very mountain where the rebel sons of God, the Watchers of 1 Enoch, descended, Jesus reveals to Peter, James, and John, exactly who he is—the embodied Glory of the Old Testament, the divine Name, the essence of Yahweh now incarnate. The meaning is just as transparent: I’ve come to earth to take back what is mine—and it starts *here*.

At this point you may be wondering how all this jives with the rest of Jesus’ life. Wasn’t Jesus rejected? Didn’t Israel itself defeat and thus delay the kingdom? Didn’t the gates of hell prevail when Jesus was crucified? Didn’t Satan and the demonic *elohim* know what God was up to and stop it, at least for a while? Good questions.

¹⁶⁵ See Appendix ____ for a discussion of Luke 10:1-12, as well as the seventy versus seventy-two readings in this chapter.

¹⁶⁶ See ABD entry on Hermon and DDD for supporting material on the website.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

¹⁶⁸ Have some material on the grotto of Pan here:

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Early%20History%20-%20Archaeology/Archaeological%20Sites%20in%20Israel%20-%20Banyas-%20Cult%20Cent>. See also the work of Judd Burton on this; see also <http://www.bibleplaces.com/banias.htm>.

¹⁶⁹ “This tradition can be traced back to Cyril of Jerusalem (348 - c. 386 CE), who speaks of it in passing: ‘They (Moses and Elijah) were with Him when He was transfigured on Mt. Thabor and told the disciples about the end which He was to fulfil in Jerusalem’ (*Catech.* 12, 16). His contemporary Jerome (348–420 CE) likewise mentions it only casually when describing to Eustochium the journeys made in the Near East by her mother Paula: ‘She climbed Mt. Thabor on which the Lord was transfigured’ (*Epistle* 108, 13) (ABD, 828).

¹⁷⁰ Avraham Negev, *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land* (3rd ed.; New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1996, c1990); “Tabor, Mount (Place),” ABD, 305.

¹⁷¹ See *Jesus and His World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary*; John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav (Fortress, 1995), 209-210. Mount Hermon also makes good sense in light of Psalm 68:15-

Chapter 24

Stealth Tactic

It should come as no surprise that certain threads of the divine council worldview of the Old Testament are picked up by New Testament writers with respect to the crucifixion of Jesus and his work on the cross. There are in fact so many that the next two chapters are devoted to bringing some of those connections to light.

Demonic Spectators to the Crucifixion

All four gospels describe the crucifixion of Jesus, to varying degrees of detail. One of the more thorough descriptions is that of Matthew 27:32-46:

³² As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. ³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), ³⁴ they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. ³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. ³⁶ Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. ³⁷ And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” ³⁸ Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. ³⁹ And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” ⁴¹ So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, ⁴² “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’ ” ⁴⁴ And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. ⁴⁵ Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Though Matthew does not create specific points of connection with every element in the psalm, his description clearly draws on Psalm 22. The parallels are hard to miss:

Matthew 27	Psalm 22
... they divided his garments among them by casting lots ... (v. 35)	... they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots ...” (22:18)
... they sat down and kept watch over him there ... And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads ... So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him ...” (vv. 36, 38, 41)	“All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads ... they stare and gloat over me ... “ (22:17)
... Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”	“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (22:1)

In addition to the clear textual links between Matthew and Psalm 22, scholars have long noticed that elements of Psalm 22 appear to describe the procedures and effects of crucifixion:

- “all my bones are out of joint” (22:14)
- “my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws” (22:15)
- “they have pierced my hands and feet—I can count all my bones” (22:16)¹⁷²

These connections are familiar to most readers. Less apparent are some under-the-surface connections to the divine council worldview and its cosmic holy war context. If you were to read the entire psalm, at this point in our journey verse 12 would no doubt jump off the page: “Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me.” Strong bulls of *Bashan*?

Bashan, as we have seen, carries a lot of theological baggage. We’ve seen that Bashan, overlapping with the region of Dan, is linked in the Old Testament to serpent motifs and the giant clan enemies of ancient Israel, the vestiges of the Nephilim bloodline. As we saw in the last chapter, it also contained a major cult center within its borders, near Mount Hermon. Bashan’s history as a place of worship for gods considered demonic in Old Testament theology includes its prominence in the alternative worship of Samaria, the renegade northern kingdom of the ten tribes of Israel who forsook David’s dynasty when Solomon died. This confederacy and rival kingdom was set up by Jeroboam after the dramatic confrontation with Solomon’s heir, Rehoboam, described in 1 Kings 12. The Bible specifically tells us that Jeroboam set up a worship center in Dan where calves of gold were worshipped (1 Kings 12:25-33). So the worship of other gods—gods besides Yahweh and thus under the condemnation of passages like Deut 32:17—was known to occur at Bashan. Moreover, these gods were fashioned as bulls or cows.

These “bovines of Bashan” are given specific attention in Amos 4

¹ “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’ ² The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. ³ And you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead; and you shall be cast out into Harmon,” declares the LORD.

Since the “cows of Bashan” are said to speak to their “husbands,” scholars are universally agreed that Amos is specifically addressing upper-class women of northern Israel who were idolaters of the golden calves of Bashan. I wouldn’t disagree with that necessarily, but there’s more to the wording than that. Amos could be targeting temple priestesses who served the gods along with male priests. It is also quite possible that the cows of Bashan are the deities themselves in the form of the idols. This possibility is strengthened by noticing that their crimes: “oppressing the poor (*dallim*)” and “crushing the needy (*ebyonim*).” These same two Hebrew words are used in Psalm 82, where the corrupt *elohim* are accused of exactly these same crimes (Psa. 82:3-4).

For our purposes, the point is that “bulls of Bashan” has certifiable connections to demons. Although Psalm 22 wasn’t originally messianic in focus, Matthew’s use of it alerts us to an association. The implication is that Jesus, at the moment of agony and death, was surrounded by the demonic *elohim* who had been the foes of Yahweh and his children for millennia.

Had They But Known

I can’t help but recall C. S. Lewis’ description of Aslan the lion, Lewis’ Christ figure, bound and laying helpless on the stone table, surrounded by the Satan-figure, the White Witch, and her evil minions, ready to slay their helpless victim. Had they but known the ultimate result, they would never have done it. As Lewis so skillfully allegorizes, the sacrifice of Aslan accomplishes redemption for the fallen son of Adam, and the subsequent demise of the White Witch. Paul said the same thing about the evil powers behind the crucifixion in 1 Corinthians 2:

⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

The key term in Paul’s statement is “rulers” or *archontōn* in Greek, the plural form of *archōn*. The word *archōn* was commonly used in Greek to refer to human rulers, and Paul uses it this way in passages like Romans 13:3. However, there are several scriptural indicators that, in this instance, Paul has cosmic rulers in mind.

Paul is speaking specifically of the “rulers” (*archontōn*) of this “age” (*aiōnos*). Both Greek words in this phrase are found in Ephesians 2:1-2, where Paul says, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world (*aiōnos*), following the prince (*archōn*) of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.” Here Satan is described as an *archōn* who is in some way responsible for the “course of this *aiōnos*.” The “rulers” (*archontōn*) of this age (*aiōnos*) in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians would then be demonic entities carrying out Satan’s agenda. These rulers are also said by Paul to be “doomed to pass away” (1 Cor 2:6). This would be a very odd thing for Paul to point out for rhetorical impact, since all humans die. But if it refers to divine beings—precisely what is described in Psalm 82:7, where the lesser *elohim* are sentenced to “die like humankind”—the description is fitting.

The Mystery of Messiah

The reason that the demonic *elohim* were blinded to the lynchpin of Yahweh’s plan, the destruction of the incarnate Yahweh, was that they could not foresee the resurrection. To us it appears that the Old Testament, read, preached, and taught for centuries, is crystal clear about a resurrected messiah in the pages of the Old Testament. It really isn’t. Think about what a quandary we would be in without the New Testament, *all* of which was written *after* the resurrection.

If you take away the New Testament and the ministry of Jesus, the Old Testament is actually quite cryptic about the Messiah. There are only two Old Testament passages that use the term *mashiach* that are quoted by New Testament writers as prophetic statements about messiah: Psa 2:2 (quoted in Acts 4:25-26; Rev 19:19) and Psa 89:51 (a faint allusion to it occurs in 1 Pet 4:14). Another example of the clarity we take for granted (but which is hardly clear at all) is the idea that messiah would be God incarnate. There is actually no passage in the entirety of the Old Testament that unambiguously says the Messiah would be Yahweh incarnate. The titles of Isaiah 9:6 hint at this, but scholars have noted that the five titles are strikingly similar to the fivefold list of titles taken by Egyptian pharaohs, who were just men. It is well known among scholars that the Israelite kings of the 8th century B.C. (when this prophecy was written) incorporated Egyptian throne symbology. For example, Hezekiah’s seal, discovered by archaeologists, bears the familiar Egyptian winged *kheper* beetle on it. Egyptian Pharaohs called their kings “god,” “everlasting,” and “father,” but the Pharaohs were mere mortals. But if Isaiah’s readers could mentally link one word in those titles (“wonderful”; Hebrew *pele*) with the use of that term in Judges 13:18-19, we have a different story. This Hebrew word is used of both the invisible Yahweh (v. 19) and the Angel of Yahweh (v. 18) in Judges 13, and then subsequently linked to a Davidic king whose government would have no end (Isa 9:7). But how many Jews (or anyone) could detect that without hindsight? Hardly any from what we read in the gospels. The disciples and the Pharisees are equally clueless, and the former only knew what they knew because Jesus was teaching them.

What this tells us is that messianic prophecy was deliberately not laid out in clear statements. It was cryptic. Rather than a list of verses spelling how who messiah would be (and more importantly, what the plan was for re-establishing the kingdom of God) we instead get a mosaic of traits scattered throughout the Old Testament, the pieces to a picture that must be mentally assembled without any prior frame of reference—like putting a puzzle together without ever seeing the completed picture on the box lid.

Most cryptic of all was the intended plan once messiah arrived. Genesis 3:15 promised only a human deliverer, a descendant of Eve. We like to read blood sacrifice into the animal skins God gave Adam and Eve in the garden, as though God couldn't have just created them. And even if there was a sacrifice, it was an animal sacrifice. There is no hint that the human redeemer prophesied in Genesis 3:15 would have to die and rise again. The fact that the kings of Israel were called “my son” by God—and yet they all died without being raised—means that the title “son of God” in and of itself did not speak of a sacrificial death or resurrection. It isn't until the 8th century B.C. (and perhaps much later, depending on the disputed authorship of that chapter) that we get any hint of a dying and rising deliverer figure, courtesy of the book of Isaiah.¹⁷³

And it is only a hint—a text that could be read the way we know it played out, but could also be read other ways. The death and resurrection of the servant, while certainly exegetically plausible, is not self-evident. In the first 48 chapters of Isaiah, the “servant” refers to corporate Israel. That changes in Isaiah 49, which sets the table for chapter 53. For most readers, if not all, Isaiah 53 would leave people wondering which servant Isaiah was talking about and why he changed the point of reference for the servant character.

While supernatural intelligences (i.e., Satan and demons) could recognize Jesus when he was on earth (Mark 5:7; Luke 4:3-9; 8:28), Paul's point in 1 Cor 2 was that they did not know what God's strategy was. The best plan of action was to kill Jesus—exactly what God had foreseen and planned, but they had no clue this act would trigger their own defeat. In hindsight, and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, Paul understood that the precise connections between an anointed deliverer, the messiah, and the plan of God for reclaiming the nations were kept under wraps. Paul referred to the plan and what it produced as the mystery of Christ:

³ . . . the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Eph. 3:3-6; cf. Eph. 1:9; Col. 1:26-27; Col. 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:3)

It's no wonder that Jewish writers between the Old and New Testaments didn't agree on how to interpret passages like Isaiah 53. If you look at Jewish writings from the era immediately before Jesus, you won't find much that indicates Jews were expecting a dying and rising messiah. Even the apostles found it difficult to grasp or accept. Jesus had

to teach them the meaning of the passage—it was divinely revealed *to them* (Matt. 26:2; Luke 24:7). But even then the disciples don't seem to be clear on what was going on. It was only after discovering the empty tomb that “. . . the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (John 20:8-9). Judging from Peter's visceral objection on one occasion to being told by Jesus that he would die and be raised from the dead, it seems that the disciples (at least Peter) intellectually understood what they were being told, but didn't believe it.¹⁷⁴

Still, Jesus wasn't always crystal clear about God's plan. At times he was cryptic, too, especially at the beginning of his ministry. It is interesting that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are in agreement that Jesus did not begin speaking to his disciples about his death and third day resurrection until after the Transfiguration. As we saw in the last chapter, the Transfiguration at Mount Hermon was not only a revelation of deity for Peter, James, and John, but was an announcement to the demonic *elohim* that their demise was now being set in motion. Just prior to ascending the mountain and immediately after Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ, Matthew records, “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matt 16:21).¹⁷⁵ Following this event, we have the Transfiguration, and when Jesus and his disciples descend from Mount Hermon where Jesus does something for the last time: he casts out a demon. From that point on, the gospels never record another exorcism and Jesus begins to reiterate to the disciples that he would die and rise again.¹⁷⁶

The above pattern suggests that Jesus avoided speaking of his death, and especially the resurrection, until after he was done dealing with demonic entities. Going back to Paul's comment, that “the rulers of this age” did not comprehend what was happening, it seems coherent to suggest that this information was only obtainable from Jesus himself, or the Spirit—and it was information kept close to the breast.

Stone Pillow, Stone Altar

Jesus' exchange with Nathaniel, predictably early in his ministry, is a classic example of Jesus' coded language about the plan he was on earth to accomplish. It also has points of contact with the divine council.

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him,

“Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”⁵¹ And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:43-51)

Scholars have struggled to discern what exactly Jesus meant by his prediction to Nathaniel, that he would see “heaven opened, and angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” The passage is enigmatic for the simple reason that it never happens—at no point in any of the gospels do we see angels “ascend and descend” on Jesus.

About the only thing that scholars agree on regarding this odd statement by Jesus is that it is an allusion back to Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:10-17

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

I have underlined the phrases above because they all factor in the interpretive possibilities. Since this is the only place in the Bible (besides John 1:51) that describes “angels of God ascending and descending,” and since John’s wording is that this will happen “upon” the Son of Man, some scholars believe that the point is that Jesus symbolically takes the place of the ladder, and so is the means to God. This is actually unlikely for Greek grammatical reasons.¹⁷⁷ Second, the point could be that Jesus isn’t the ladder per se, but marks the place where the ladder touched the earth—in other words, Jesus was saying that Nathaniel would see “heaven come to earth” or something like that. A third option is that the point of the analogy Jesus is making is not the ladder or the fact that the ladder touches the earth—in fact, it isn’t the ladder at all. As far back as Augustine interpreters have considered whether the Son of Man is to be equated with the stone upon which Jacob’s head was resting when he had the dream. As Genesis 28 notes, this stone was made into an altar where Jacob sacrificed to Yahweh. The stone is “anointed” (*mashiach*) which is the word later used for “messiah” (Gen. 28:18; 31:13).

I tend to think that John conveyed this cryptic exchange to us for exactly the same reasons that Jesus first uttered the words to Nathaniel: he wanted all these images—and more—to flood our minds. Yes, Jesus is the conduit from God to man. He was—quite literally—where heaven and earth intersected. His blood would be the ultimate sacrifice, the culmination point for the sacrifice at Bethel. But if Nathaniel and John (and Jesus!) were students of their Old Testament and firmly acquainted with other Jewish theological literature of the time that sought to interpret the Old Testament, the statement meant much more.

In our earlier discussions we talked about how prophetic figures—people chosen by God to carry and communicate his message—had to be commissioned by direct encounter with God. This encounter often took place in the throne room of God, where members of the heavenly host were present. For Jacob, this encounter was his dream. He saw “angels of God” and also saw Yahweh, who stood either at the top of the ladder or beside it (the Hebrew is ambiguous). Subsequent to the dream, Jacob encounter “angels of God” once more, on his way to meet Esau, his estranged brother. In that instance we read, “Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them he said, ‘This is God’s camp!’ So he called the name of that place Mahanaim” (Gen 32:1-2). Since angels are messengers of God, Jacob perceived that the place where he met them—this time not in a dream—was literally the camp or abode of God. And, in the context of the divine council worldview, it was.

Taking this to John 1:51, we can see how the analogy works and is heightened. Jesus replaces Yahweh in the context of the ladder vision. The angels of God are serving and representing Jesus. Where Jesus is, God and the council are. Jesus, in effect, is the messenger of the council, sent to accomplish the will of the Father. And more than that, he is the stone which is the locus of atonement.

Jews were thinking this way before Jesus ever arrived. Philo, the famous Jewish theologian whose life overlapped with Jesus’, understood the “place” and the “altar” of Jacob’s dream to be the Logos (“word”), the same term John later used of Jesus.¹⁷⁸ In another text Philo saw the house of God of Gen. 28:17 as “the Logos, by which the Ruler of the universe governs all things.”¹⁷⁹

The idea of Jesus being identified with this altar stone is interesting for other reasons. In Daniel 2, the stone that destroys the empires of humankind is equated with the kingdom of God. Already in the centuries before Jesus writers like Josephus (*Antiquities* 10:210) and books like 4 Ezra (13:6, 32, 26-37, 52) understood this stone to be the messiah. The Targums interpreted “the stone which the builders rejected” in Psalm 118:22 as David, the son of Jesse. Matthew 21:42 echoes that identification. Amazingly, Psalm 118:22 and its identification as Jesus is quoted no less than seven times in the New Testament.¹⁸⁰ Isaiah 28:16 references the same idea, but applies it to the temple: “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: Whoever believes will not be in haste.’”

These three threads—the stone altar at Bethel, marking the abode of God and his council, the stone of the kingdom of God, and the cornerstone of the temple—converge in the mission of Christ, the incarnate Yahweh. The temple was the dwelling place of God, the place where the Glory would reside. That Glory was embodied in the second Yahweh in the Old Testament. The temple represented Yahweh’s physical rule in his domain, the Promised Land—the land allotted for him and his people after the Babel incident, when the other nations were disinherited. It meant the kingdom of Yahweh on earth had been re-established. The temple was also the place where sacrifice was brought and offered.

Jesus is all of these things. In him dwells the essence and fullness of the Godhead, bodily, as Paul wrote (Col. 2:9). He is the Word; He has the Name; He is God’s Angel-Messenger, the embodied Yahweh of the Old Testament. Jesus is the temple. As the place of sacrifice, Jesus is also the sacrifice itself, which is why the book of Hebrews has him taking his own blood into the holy of holies (Hebrews 9:12; 10:19).

It’s a good thing that the “bulls of Bashan,” the demon *elohim* now under judgment, failed to discern how all these things would come together. Their bloodlust turned out to be the harbinger of their own destruction and expulsion from their own domain.

¹⁷² This is the ESV translation. It should be noted that most Hebrew manuscripts of this verse do not have a reference to piercing the hands and feet, but read something to the effect: “*like a lion* [they are at] *my hands and feet*.” The lion imagery is interesting since later it would be applied to the Devil (1 Pet 5:8). For piercing, see Zech 12:10.

¹⁷³ The 8th century is Isaiah’s lifetime. A later chronology depends on whether Isaiah 40-55 was put together around the time of the exile, using what Isaiah had written in Isaiah 1-39, or if, as critical scholars argue, there was a second or third prophetic figure writing under the name “Isaiah.”

¹⁷⁴ Peter objected, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matt. 16:22). Jesus retorted, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (ESV). Although the ESV and many translations have “satan” capitalized, Jesus’ point was not that Peter was the devil. Rather, the word “satan,” which is Hebrew, means “adversary.” By objecting, Peter was standing in the way of the mission and had to be rebuked.

¹⁷⁵ Immediately after he told his disciples

¹⁷⁶ Matthew has Jesus doing this four more times after the Transfiguration (17:23; 20:17-19; 26:32; 27:63); Mark, three (Mark 9:31; 10:34; 14:28), and Luke three (18:33; 24:7, 46).

¹⁷⁷ See the scholarly article by J. C. O’Neill, “Son of Man, Stone of Blood (John 1:51),” *NovTest XLV*, 4 (2003): 374-381. O’Neill writes: “This is unlikely because the preposition *ἐπί* is used in John with the accusative and the LXX used the genitive. In the context of Gen. 28:12, the angels are using the ladder to ascend to heaven and to descend from heaven, and *ἐπί* with the genitive is appropriate. If the transcriber or translator of John 1:51 into Greek had wanted to suggest that the Son of Man was now the ladder, he would have naturally used a genitive. Instead, we have an accusative.”

¹⁷⁸ Philo, *de somniis* i. 116, 11.

¹⁷⁹ Philo, *de migratione Abrahami*, 5-6.

¹⁸⁰ Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; 1 Peter 2:4, 7.

Chapter 25

Unseen Siege

Paul asserts in 1 Cor 2:6-8 that, had the *elohim* in charge of this fallen world understood the consequences of moving people to crucify the son of God, they would never have done it. The sacrifice of Christ was a mystery, a secret decreed before the ages, understood only by those to whom the Spirit would reveal it. And He wasn't talking to his enemies.

The *elohim* of the nations were not and are not omniscient. Sentenced with the loss of their own immortality (Psalm 82), they had no idea that Yahweh's kingdom had already been inaugurated under their own noses and would begin an aggressive advance in the wake of the unthinkable: the resurrection of the incarnate Yahweh. Paul described what the resurrection meant for the demonic *elohim* this way in Col. 2:15: "He [Christ] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them by it [the cross]." Not surprisingly, Paul's assessment comes out of the Old Testament, and points to a place we've seen before—Bashan.

Take Out the Head

Bashan was the symbolic ground zero of Old Testament demonic geography. But for all the darkness conjured up by the term, references to "Bashan" in the Old Testament aren't all bad news, unless you're on the dark side. Psalm 68:15-23 describes the fall of Bashan, an even still future to the writer (vv. 21-22). For us, it's an "already, but not quite yet" victory.

- ¹⁵ O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan;
O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan!
- ¹⁶ Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain,
at the mount that God desired for his abode,
yes, where the LORD will dwell forever?
- ¹⁷ The chariots of God are twice ten thousand,
thousands upon thousands;
the Lord is among them; the one of Sinai is among the holy ones.¹⁸¹
- ¹⁸ You ascended on high,
leading a host of captives in your train
and receiving gifts from humankind,
even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.
- ¹⁹ Blessed be the Lord,
who daily bears us up;

God is our salvation. *Selah*

²⁰ Our God is a God of salvation,
and to GOD, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.

²¹ But God will strike the heads of his enemies,
the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways.

²² The Lord said,
“I will bring (them) back from Bashan,
I will bring (them) back from the depths of the sea,
²³ that you may strike your feet in their blood,
that the tongues of your dogs may have their portion from the foe.”

The first thing that sticks out in this passage is that the infamous Mount Bashan is called the “mountain of God” (68:15). Most commentators assume this language is meant to convey the idea that Bashan was God’s mountain as well. I would disagree, but only in a nuanced way. At the beginning of the psalm, Mount Bashan is not the territory of the God of Israel. That changed by the end of the psalm—and that change has very specific New Testament connections.

The phrase “mountain of God” is actually “mountain of *elohim*” (*har elohim*) in Hebrew. That means it can be translated as either “mountain of God” or “mountain of the gods.” The latter makes much more sense than the former in context for the very observable reason that the two mountains in the passage—Bashan and Sinai—are rivals at the beginning of the psalm.

¹⁵ O mountain of God [or, of the gods], mountain of Bashan;
O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan!

¹⁶ Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain,
at the mount that God desired for his abode [Sinai or Zion], yes, where the LORD
will dwell forever?

¹⁷ The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands;
the Lord is among them; the one of Sinai is among the holy ones.

God desired Sinai for his abode, and the psalmist asks Bashan, “Why the envy?” This would make little sense if Bashan was already under Yahweh’s authority.

What we have here is a contrast of association. In the Old Testament, Sinai is firmly associated with Yahweh and Israel. Sinai is the place where Moses brought the people after the escape from Egypt. It is the place where the embodied Yahweh and the divine council handed down the law, “written with the finger of God.”¹⁸² Bashan is the polar opposite of Sinai. It is a place associated with the demonic *elohim* of Deut 32:8-9, 17 and Psalm 82. It is the place associated with the *nephilim* bloodlines who stood in opposition to the bloodline of Abraham (and so, Noah, Enoch, and Adam). It was the place of disinheritance, and so it is that Bashan hates Sinai in this psalm.

The rest of the psalm describes an assault on Bashan by Yahweh and his holy army against Bashan. We know the description refers to spiritual warfare since there was no

such engagement of the Israelites in the Old Testament, and also because verse 17 clearly speaks of a divine army. Yahweh, the divine warrior, will one day tear down the strongholds of Bashan, “striking the heads of his enemies” (v. 21). The result will be complete victory. Yahweh is depicted as leading a train of captives down from the mountain (vv. 18, 22) and back from “the depths of the sea.” The sea, of course, is one of the more common terms for the realm of chaos and disorder. The victory is described in graphic terms, no doubt familiar to people who had witnessed the horrors of ancient combat: Yahweh’s own victorious warriors will tramp through the blood of the evil ones, and the dogs will eat their remains.

Taking Prisoners

Amid the description of triumph in Psalm 68 we come to verse 18:

¹⁸ You ascended on high,
leading a host of captives in your train
and receiving gifts from humankind,
even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.

If the verse sounds familiar it should. Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8. Here is the quotation and the context of Ephesians 4 leading up to it:

¹ I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. ⁸ Therefore it says,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”

It may surprise you, but this is considered a very difficult citation of the Old Testament by our New Testament author, Paul. I think you’ll see why when you see the relevant parts of the passages side-by-side, as well as what Paul writes afterward:

Psalm 68:18	Ephesians 4:8
<u>You</u> ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and <u>receiving</u> <u>gifts</u> from humankind.	When <u>he</u> ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he <u>gave gifts</u> to men. ⁹ (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also

	ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...
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For Paul this Old Testament verse was about Jesus “ascending on high” and “giving” gifts to humanity, but the Old Testament text does not identify the subject of the ascending, and has that subject *receiving* gifts instead of *giving* them. Before we resolve this “receiving” versus “giving” problem, we need some context.

It isn't hard to find disagreements among the commentators on what Paul is doing in Ephesians 4:8. Some try to change the meaning of Psalm 68, saying that verse 18 refers to Yahweh' "ascent" to Zion. That reading makes little sense since the imagery is very clearly warfare ("captives in your train") and Bashan is the enemy. Psalm 68 gives us a standard description of conquest, known from other ancient texts and even from ancient sculpture and iconography. The victorious captain of the army leads the enemy captives behind him; they are the human booty of war. The gifts he receives refers to tribute payments. When conquering a city or region, the victor would demand tribute payment in return for sparing the city from total destruction. The Old Testament describes this on several occasions, where foreign rulers among the Assyrians and Babylonians demand tribute from Israelite and Judean kings at different points in Israel's history. The imagery is not at all strange to the ancient Semitic context.

When Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8, he does so thinking of Jesus. Part of the confusion over how to interpret what Paul is saying is that so many commentators have assumed that captives are being *liberated* in Ephesians 4. That isn't the case. That idea would flatly contradict the well understood imagery of Psalm 68:18. There is no liberation; there is conquest.

The effect of what Paul does is to once again merge Jesus with Yahweh. In Psalm 68:18 it was Yahweh who is described as the future conqueror of Bashan, the cosmic-geographical symbol of evil. For Paul it is Jesus. And so it is. Jesus, the incarnate second Yahweh, surrounded by the demonic *elohim* "bulls of Bashan," fulfills the imagery of Psalm 68 by "putting them to an open shame" and "triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15). Psalm 68:18 and Eph. 4:8 are in agreement if one sees conquest, not liberation.

Widening the Net

The Fall of Bashan or, in New Testament terms, the victory of the cross, was but the first major campaign in the long holy war to restore the rule of Yahweh over all the nations of the earth. The New Testament depicts the present world as one where the forces of darkness—the demonic *elohim* of the "Deuteronomy 32 worldview"—are actively resisting the earthly and human family-army of Yahweh.

Paul in particular sees the cosmic-geographical conflict raging all around believers. In an effort to awaken his readers to the unseen war, he uses a variety of terms that have ruling, territorial nuances.¹⁸³ We looked at one of those terms in the last chapter, *archōn*, often translated as “ruler.” It was Paul who used that term to describe the “rulers (*archontōn*) of this age,” malevolent spiritual entities who were doomed to die (1 Cor. 2:5-6) as a result of Jesus’ work on the cross.

The backdrop for understanding the conquest of Bashan and Paul’s employment of *archōn* is of course what I’ve called the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. Another passage in the Old Testament, Daniel 10, presumes the Deuteronomy 32 worldview and provides us with a specific link to Paul’s terminology. Daniel writes:

⁴ On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris) ⁵ I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. ⁶ His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude. ⁷ And I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, for the men who were with me did not see the vision, but a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled to hide themselves. . . . ¹⁰ And behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. ¹¹ And he said to me, “O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you.” And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. ¹² Then he said to me, “Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. ¹³ The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, ¹⁴ and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come.” ¹⁵ When he had spoken to me according to these words, I turned my face toward the ground and was mute. ¹⁶ And behold, one in the likeness of the children of man touched my lips. Then I opened my mouth and spoke. I said to him who stood before me, “O my lord, by reason of the vision pains have come upon me, and I retain no strength. ¹⁷ How can my lord’s servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.” ¹⁸ Again one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me. ¹⁹ And he said, “O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage.” And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, “Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me.” ²⁰ Then he said, “Do you know why I have come to you? But now I will return to fight against the prince of Persia; and when I go out, behold, the prince of Greece will come. ²¹ But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth: there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince.”

Biblical scholars are in unanimous agreement that the “princes” referred to in Daniel 10 are divine beings, not humans. This is transparent from the mention of Michael in 10:13 and 10:21 (see also Daniel 12:1). The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, also makes this clear. The Hebrew word for “prince” used throughout the chapter is *sar*. In Daniel 10:13, where Michael is called “one of the chief princes,” the Septuagint refers to Michael as “one of the chief *archontōn*.” In verse 21 “prince” is translated *aggelos* (“angel”). In another Greek translation of Daniel, a text many scholars consider even older than the Septuagint currently in use, the “prince” of Persia is called the *archōn* of Persia and Michael is Israel’s *archōn* in 10:21.¹⁸⁴ Paul most often used his Greek Bible when writing his letters to Greek-speaking Gentiles. It makes perfect sense that Paul would have these passages in mind when speaking of the “rulers” (*archontōn*) of this present age (*aiōnos*).

Most of Paul’s other cosmic-geographical ruler terms are familiar to many readers.

- “principalities” (*archē*)
- “powers” / “authorities” (*exousia*)
- “cosmic rulers” (*kosmokratōr*)
- “powers” (*dynamis*)
- “dominions” / “lords” (*kyrios*)
- “thrones” (*thronos*)

These terms are often grouped. The first three are all found in Eph. 6:12 (“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”). Paul tells us in Eph. 1:20-21 that when God raised Jesus from the dead “he seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above every ruler and authority and power and dominion.” That thought is echoed in Col. 2:15, where Paul says that Christ is “the head over every ruler and authority.” Paul refers to the lords of 1 Cor 8:5 as *gods*—and then identifies them as demons (1 Cor. 10:20). It was only after Christ had risen that God’s plan was “made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10). Too bad for them.

These cosmic forces are the “rulers and authorities” disarmed and put to shame by the cross (Col. 2:15). But what spelled doom for them was a boon to us: “I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39). And this reversal—the cross as their demise and our blessing, brings us back to Ephesians 4.

Their Loss, Our Gain

We return now to the “receiving” and “giving” wording “problem” in Paul’s use of Psalm 68 in Ephesians 4. Paul’s wording doesn’t deny there was conquest. What it does is point to the result of the conquest. In the ancient world the conqueror would parade the captives and demand tribute for himself. Jesus is the conqueror of Psalm 68, and the booty does indeed rightfully belong to him. But what does he do? He uses the occasion of his conquest to give gifts to his people—the Church—as Paul immediately explains in Eph. 4:9-10. Christ’s conquest results in the dispensing of gifts (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers) to his inheritance, his family of believers.

But what about the descent? What does that refer to and how does that factor into this? There are two possible answers to this and either works with what I’m saying here. The most common view is that, upon his death, Jesus descended into the lower parts *of the earth*. This is the way Eph 4:9 is worded in many translations. In this case, the language speaks of both the grave and cosmic Sheol, the Underworld. This is entirely possible since elsewhere in the New Testament we read that Jesus descended into the Underworld to confront the “spirits in prison”—the original transgressing sons of God from Genesis 6 (1 Peter 3:18-22).¹⁸⁵ But that visitation may not be Paul’s point of reference here.

The second view is reflected in the ESV, the translation I used in the table above. That has Jesus descending to “the lower regions [in other words], the earth.” This option fits the context better (the gifts) and has some other literary advantages. If this option is correct, then the descent of verses 9-10 do not refer to Jesus’ time in the grave/Sheol, but the Holy Spirit’s coming to earth after Jesus’ conquering ascension on the day of Pentecost.

The second view makes chronological sense since the descent is connected to Christ’s giving of gifts to the Church, but it raises a pretty obvious question: Is Paul confusing the Christ with the Spirit? Or perhaps we should ask, Is the Spirit Christ? The questions sound odd, but they are actually no different than asking whether Jesus and God are “confused” with one another or, more simply, Is Jesus God? The answer, as we’ve seen in previous chapters, is yes and no. Jesus is the second Yahweh, the embodied Yahweh of the Old Testament. Jesus is not only Yahweh embodied, but Yahweh incarnate as a human being. But Jesus is not the “Father” Yahweh. He is but isn’t Yahweh. It’s the same with the Spirit. The Spirit is Yahweh, and so he is Jesus, but not incarnate or embodied. The Spirit is but isn’t Jesus as Jesus is but isn’t Yahweh the Father.

Viewed against this backdrop, the idea that Jesus and the Spirit might be identified with each other isn’t so strange. In fact, it helps us make sense of some things certain New Testament writers said about the Spirit.

It is clear that Jesus and the Spirit are different persons. That is clear from passages about Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:16), his temptation (Matt. 4:1), and other passages (Matt. 29:18-20; Acts 7:55). Jesus also said he and the Father would send the Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26; compare Luke 24:29). The Spirit was to come and indwell and empower believers. The events on Pentecost in Acts 2 mark the coming of the Spirit.

But the New Testament also identifies the Spirit with Jesus. Here are some examples:

Acts 16:6 And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

Romans 8:9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

Philippians 1: 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.

Galatians 4:4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

1 Peter 1:10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, 11 inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.

Not only did the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross mean the fall of Bashan, emblematic of the cosmic powers of evil, but it also triggered the empowerment of the Church by the gifts of the Spirit. But there’s still more to the demise of Mount Bashan than meets the eye. It was not only the preface to Pentecost; it accelerated the reversal of Babel.

¹⁸¹ On the translation “the Lord is among them; the one of Sinai is among the holy ones” see Marvin E. Tate, *Word Biblical Commentary : Psalms 51-100* (Word Biblical Commentary 20; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 161. Tate’s translation is better than the ESV, but I also think some of the alternatives he points to in his footnotes are better than his own translation (see my alterations of ESB elsewhere in the psalm: v. 18). This psalm is notoriously difficult with respect to textual criticism.

¹⁸² See Chapter 13.

¹⁸³ See the excellent article by Dan G. Reid in the *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (“Principalities and Powers”).

¹⁸⁴ See Greek Theodotion Daniel.

¹⁸⁵ See Chapter 26.

Chapter 26

Infiltration

The day of Pentecost is an event remembered by millions of Christians each year on the church calendar. Although it is one of the more familiar passages in the New Testament outside the gospels, what Acts 2 describes as happening that day definitely sounds strange.

¹ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

It may not seem obvious, but this passage is littered with divine council connections. While waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit after the resurrection, the disciples were gathered in a room when a sound like “a mighty rushing wind” swept through the house. That the fire had “tongues” is easily understood as metaphorical in the same way we speak today of fire “licking” what it is burning. But why is the fire associated with the Holy Spirit?

The answer lies in the Old Testament. Back in Chapter 18 we looked at how genuine prophets—spokespeople for God—were presumed to have had a direct encounter with God to commission them for ministry. Frequently this encounter was in God’s throne room, in the presence of the heavenly host, the divine council. God’s throne and throne room was often described as fiery or in the midst of fire (e.g., Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1). That motif was especially prominent in the appearances at Sinai. Fire in the Old Testament was therefore identified with the presence of God, a visible manifestation of Yahweh’s glory and essence. In Acts 2 the gathered disciples meet Yahweh’s presence and are commissioned for their task of preaching the good news of Jesus’ work. The fire connects them to the throne room. The tongues are emblematic of their speaking ministry.

What happened on the day of Pentecost shouldn’t have been completely unexpected. True, it’s very likely none of the gathered disciples were around on the day of Jesus’ baptism when John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize people “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16).¹⁸⁶ But we know from Acts 1:1-5 that Jesus had indeed told the disciples he would send the Spirit after his resurrection, and therefore gave them orders to wait for that event.¹⁸⁷

But what does this have to do with the tower of Babel incident, where the nations of the earth were disinherited by Yahweh and put under the authority of lesser *elohim*? As it turns out, a lot. Let's look at the larger passage in context:

¹ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided (*diamerizō*) tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. ⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered (*sugcheō*), because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

At first glance there doesn't seem to be much that is useful here in terms of the incident at Babel which had such cosmic-geographical and theological importance in the Old Testament. All is not what it seems, though.

The two underlined terms are of critical importance for understanding what Acts 2 and the events of Pentecost are really signaling. The second term, *sugcheō* (v. 6) is the same word used in the Septuagint version of tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:7 - Come, let us go down and there confuse (Septuagint: *sugcheō*) their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."¹⁸⁸ Both Acts 2:6 and the Septuagint of Genesis 11:7 link "confusion" (*sugcheō*) with human speech. In Genesis 11, of course, the context is the division of the nations (and their languages) at Babel. The other term in verse 3 (*diamerizō*) is also used in the Septuagint, but not in Genesis 11. This word is used in the other major passage that describes what happened at Babel, Deuteronomy 32 (Septuagint: "when the Most High divided [*diamerizō*] the nations, when he scattered humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the nations according to the angels of God").

What this suggests is that Luke is drawing on the Septuagint, and specifically the tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 and Deuteronomy 32:8-9, to describe the events on Pentecost. What happened there has some relationship to what happened at Babel—but what is it?

We've already seen that the coming of the Spirit with fire mimics the Old Testament's divine encounter commissioning scenes. That tongues of fire were "divided" as they

came to rest on each of the disciples is significant. The word “divided” (*diamerizō*) in that phrase is more coherently understood as “distributed” (to each person). These individuals. Individual disciples were commissioned and set apart for ministry—specifically, the language barrier was removed for preaching. As the extended story in Acts 2 tells us, Jews from numerous geographic regions were present in Jerusalem on Pentecost, and each heard the good news in their own language. This was a sign that the gospel was going to spread through these men, beginning at Jerusalem (cf. Acts 1:8). The division of humanity into many languages and nations at Babel was going to be overcome by the work of Jesus, the second Yahweh incarnate, and his Spirit. The nations would again be His.

The really amazing thing about Acts 2, though, is the boring part: the list of nations. To understand what Luke’s list telegraphs, we have to go back to Genesis 11. Here’s a map of the nations listed in Genesis 10 that were divided in Genesis 11.¹⁸⁹



What are we looking at? The key idea to grasp is that the “Table of Nations” in Genesis *represents the known world at the time it was written*. The Old Testament is a product of the ancient Near Eastern environment of which it was a part. There are no references in it (or anywhere else in the Bible) to China, South America, North America, Australia, etc. At the time of the Old Testament’s composition, what this means is that the Old Testament description of the disinheriting of the nations in Genesis 11 and Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is based on all the nations known to those writers. The list covers Mesopotamia and the lands beyond it to the east, the rest of the Fertile Crescent (Syria and Canaan). It hits Arabia, Egypt, and the lands bordering the southern Mediterranean, as well as all the countries of Asia Minor which border the northern Mediterranean. Tarshish was the most remote known point. What lay beyond that city, through what we now call the Gates of Gibraltar, was a complete mystery well into the modern era.

It's readily apparent that the list of names in Acts 2 and the Genesis Table of Nations are different. The list in Acts 2 is therefore not a rehashing of all the names in Genesis. A few observations reveal that it is much more than that.

First, the book of Acts is about the spread of the gospel *to the known world at the time*. The book begins with the statement in Acts 1:8 that the disciples who will encounter the Spirit are to be Jesus' witnesses to the known world: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The "end of the earth" in the days of Luke, and of course the apostle Paul, was the extent of the Roman Empire.



In terms of geographical coverage, the book of Acts matches the coverage of the Table of Nations. It records the east-to-west sweep of the gospel through the entire known world. But let's take a look at a map of the nations in Acts 2 and think more about this.



If you read the list of nations in Acts 2 connected with the coming of the Spirit and the commissioning of the disciples, there is an interesting pattern.

The list begins with “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia” (2:9). Jewish literature from the Intertestamental period tells us that there was a Jewish population in Parthia (=Persia) at this time (1 Maccabees 15:22). These were Jews who had migrated to Persian after choosing to not make the journey to Jerusalem when Cyrus the Persian allowed the Jews to return home after the exile. The Medes are known from the Old Testament in connection with where the ten northern tribes of Israel had been deported by the Assyrians (2 Kings 17:6; 18:11). Persians (Parthians) and Medes are mentioned together in the Old Testament (Esther 1:19; Dan. 5:28; 6:8, 12, 15), and the kings of Media are mentioned with the Elamites as well (Jer. 25:25). The list in Acts, then, begins at the farthest points east where there were Jewish populations. It begins to move west to include inhabitants of Mesopotamia—which is where the Jews were exiled under Nebuchadnezzar.

After moving west through Mesopotamia, the list naturally splits into southern and northern directions to move westward along the coasts of the Mediterranean. It is difficult to understand why Judea is in the list, since these are people groups speaking foreign languages. Scholars have puzzled over its inclusion. Some early church fathers thought that there might be a textual problem here and proposed alternative place names. The most natural solution would be that “Judea” refers to the parameters of the Old Testament’s Davidic Empire, which extended from the Euphrates to Egypt. After the mention of Mesopotamia, David’s empire covered most of the Fertile Crescent (Syria and Damascus; cp. Gal. 1:15-21). These areas included different languages.

The list keeps moving westward to Rome. This is where the book of Acts ends, with Paul imprisoned and ready for an appeal to Caesar. Cretans and Arabians are mentioned at the end since the gospel also went there (Crete: Titus 1:5; Arabia: Gal 1:15-17).

There were three thousand Jews who came to believe in Jesus as a result of the events at Pentecost (Acts 2:41), and those three thousand Jewish converts went back to their homelands after the Pentecost pilgrimage. These new disciples were the seeds of the gospel, Yahweh's plan to reclaim the nations and widen his family to include people who were not Jews, through all the regions included in the list of disinherited nations in Genesis.

By starting in the east, where there were Jewish populations because of the exile, and moving west, the Pentecost list also confirms the evangelism strategy of Paul, who said that the gospel was for the Jew first, and then the Gentile.

The book of Acts ends with Paul imprisoned in Rome, and Luke's list in Acts 2 ends with Rome as its westernmost progression. But the reversing the circumstance of all the disinherited nations isn't finished with Rome. One thing remains. There's still one more westerly point in the list of Genesis 11. In fact, it's the most remote western point in that list—Tarshish. What about Tarshish?

The New Testament and early church tradition suggest Paul was released from his bondage and went *further* west before being taken into custody by the Romans for the final time. In fact, Paul told people that he fully expected to go to Spain after his Roman imprisonment. In his letter to the Roman believers he wrote:

²⁴ I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. ²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. ²⁸ When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

Why is Spain of any concern to us, and why did Paul want so badly to go there? Look at the maps again. In Paul's time, Spain was where Tarshish was. Tarshish was a Phoenician colony in what was later Spain. Only when Paul went to Spain (Tarshish) would his life's mission be finished. He was the apostle not to the Jewish world, but to the disinherited nations—the non-Jew, the Gentile.

As incredible as it sounds, Paul was actually conscious that his mission for Jesus actually involved spreading the gospel to the known, westernmost part of the known world—Tarshish—so that the disinheritance at Babel would be reversed. Sound crazy? I'll let Paul tell you himself:

Romans 11:25-27

²⁵ Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;
²⁷ “and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”

Paul says, “I want you to understand this mystery.” What mystery? That God’s own portion and son, Israel, hardened their heart. For how long? “Until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” Why is it important that the “coming in” of the Gentiles happen? “In this way all Israel will be saved.” This will only happen and must happen when “the Deliverer comes from Zion.” At that point, the sins of Yahweh’s child, Jacob (Israel) will be taken away and the covenant restored. As Paul said elsewhere, the gospel was “to the Jew first, then the Gentile (Greek; Romans 1:16-17).”

But why would Paul link the “fullness of the Gentiles”—the promise and requirement of Gentile salvation for the renewal of the covenant—with Tarshish? Why did he know his life and ministry wasn’t over until he got to Spain? Because he knew Isaiah 66:15-23. Read the passage and see if it reminds you of Acts 2. Amazingly, the “Pentecost material” is prefaced by the language of Psalm 68, the fall of Bashan, noted in our last chapter.

¹⁵ “For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. [See Acts 2:1-4; Psalm 68:17-18]

¹⁶ For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many.

¹⁷ “Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig’s flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the LORD. [*The apostasy of Israel and the Gentile will come to an end*]

¹⁸ “For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come [*to the source – Jerusalem*] and shall see my glory,¹⁹ and I will set a sign among them. [Acts 2:1-11]

And from them I will send survivors [*Jews who survive the exile*] to the [*disinherited*] nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud [*both in north Africa—covered on both the maps above—Paul knew the gospel had penetrated this area* (Acts

8:26-40)], who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan [*Asia Minor and Greece*], to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations.²⁰ And they shall bring all your brothers [*the Jewish missionaries will retrieve their Jewish brethren*] from all the [*disinherited*] nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem [Zion—the mountain of God, not the defeated Mount Bashan], says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD.²¹ And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD.

²² “For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD,
so shall your offspring and your name remain.
[repeats the wording of the covenant to Abraham—Yahweh’s portion—in Genesis 12:1-3; the goal is a permanent family, of all nations, in a new Eden, as it was before the disinheritance at Babel]

²³ From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD.

And so it was that a room full of Jews, commissioned directly by the Spirit, went out and won three thousand other Jews from all over the known world, who returned to the disinherited nations in which they were scattered by Providence. It was a brilliant plan. The captain of the Lord’s host came as a man to initiate Yahweh’s end game through his own atoning death, to give his hand-selected field commanders the winning strategy, and to plant cell groups for Yahweh in the territory of the enemy. Pentecost marked the beginning of an unstoppable march across the known world—and for us, even a world they didn’t know—to bring back the nations dispossessed at Babel. The time of the fullness of the Gentiles was here. The “offering of the Gentiles” was “acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit,” as Paul hoped it would be (Rom. 15:16). They were under new ownership.

¹⁸⁶ Although these verses sound like people would be baptized with two separate things (the Holy Spirit; fire), the grammar and syntax of these passages allow an equation or identification of these two elements. Hence, they speak of the same thing.

¹⁸⁷ See John 14:26; 15:26; Luke 24:49; John 7:39.

¹⁸⁸ Some commentators have noticed this but don’t know what to make of it since they lack the divine council worldview backdrop in their thinking. For example, C. K. Barrett says, “The use of the word suggests an intended allusion to the story of Babel, but the word, or words (συγχεῖν, συγχύνναι), are not uncommon (in the NT Acts only: 2:6; 9:22; 19:32; 21:27, 31) and it would be unwise to press too strongly the thought of a reversal of the dispersion of mankind as a result of diversity of speech” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles; The Acts of the Apostles* [2 v.: T&T Clark International; ill., 1 map, 2004], 119).

¹⁸⁹ Some Bible maps have “Gether” near India, but this is hardly correct. As David Baker notes in the Anchor Bible Dictionary, “According to the Table of Nations (Gen 10:23), Gether is the son of Aram, the forefather of the Arameans or Syrians, who himself was the son of Shem, son of Noah. He and his

descendants are thus Semitic. The corresponding genealogy in 1 Chr 1:17 places Gether as a son of Shem and brother of Aram. This is probably due to a simple copying error by an early scribe. His eye slipped from the first to the second of two lines which ended with the same word, 'Aram,' leading to the loss of the original line "the sons of Aram (are)" which is still found in Genesis. Little else is known about the identity or geographical location of Gether, although the association with Aram would suggest an Aramean city" (ABD, vol. 2, p. 997).



Chapter 27

Your New Identity

We've devoted a lot of space to describing the disinheritance of the nations by Yahweh, and the delegation of those nations to lesser *elohim* in the divine council. Yahweh's original intention was that all humankind would be his earthly family, ruling alongside and in cooperation with Him and his heavenly family. But circumstances devolved to the point where humanity was effectively disowned and placed beneath council personnel. But Yahweh's original objective was not forgotten. It just took another form. An earthly family whose destiny was to reinstitute the Edenic kingdom with Yahweh and his heavenly ones had to be chosen. That choice began with Abraham.

Even at the very beginning of this new strategy, Yahweh hinted that this new family—Israel, the descendants of Abraham—would be the means to reclaim the nations who had just been disowned. How that would actually work was a mystery until its fulfillment in Jesus. But looking back, we can see that God left a faint trail of clues. Yahweh appeared to Abraham in Genesis 12 as a man, telling the already aged patriarch that he would have innumerable offspring, adding that, through him, “all families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). We've already seen how this encounter involved the embodied second Yahweh. John reported as much, noting that Abraham “saw Jesus' day” (John 8:56). And Paul tells us point-blank that this was “the gospel spoken to Abraham” (Gal. 3:8).

(Believing) Seed of Abraham are the Sons of God

This last comment about the gospel spoken to Abraham is central to New Testament theology. The context in which Paul makes this observation is a longer summation of where he tells the believers at Galatia who were members of the disinherited nations (“Gentiles”) that they are *full heirs* with believing Jews—they are welcome in the family of God.

Galatians 3

⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. . . ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. . . . ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were

baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

In Christ, believers are “the sons of God.” The language of inheritance is crystal clear. It derives from and advances the Old Testament idea that humans were meant to be in the family of God. This is the backdrop for the family language in the New Testament that describes the Church. It's no coincidence that the New Testament writers thought in terms of “adoption,” “heir,” and “inheritance” to describe what the church really is—the reconstituted divine-human family of God. The believer's destiny is to become what Adam and Eve originally were—immortal, glorified imagers of God, living in His presence as his children. Consider these passages:

John 1: 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

1 John 3:1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

2 Peter 1:2 May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature . . .

Luke 20:34 And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, 35 but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, 36 for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.

Galatians 4:4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Romans 8:15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of

God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him 18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God! . . . 23 . . . but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Romans 9:6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

Ephesians 1:4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.

We are accustomed, of course, to thinking of the church as the “body of Christ.” It is certainly that as well. But this term points us to the family metaphor. The idea of the Church being “the body of Christ” reflects the truth that it is through Christ’s *physical* incarnation, *physical* death, and *physical* resurrection that believers—Jew or Gentile—become members of God’s family. It is Christ that fuses the chosen sons of God from Abraham’s line to the sons of God called from the nations. His work on the cross is where the exiled and the disinherited meet, forming one new entity. But that still isn’t the whole story.

Inheritance: A Stake in the Family Business

But believers are more than God’s family. Being “the sons of God” also means being members of the divine council—and that means there’s a job to do.

Recall that, in ancient Israelite thinking, God’s home was not only where his family lived, but also where the council met. The place was one and the same, and the members were one and the same. So it is in the New Testament. While New Testament writers employ family terms to describe the Church, it is also no coincidence that they use Old Testament terminology we would associate with the divine council. Ephesians 1:11-18 is a good starting point:

11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise

of his glory. 15 For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance with the holy ones.

The divine council connection is in Paul's last line—that the hope of the believer is his or her “glorious inheritance *among the holy ones*.”

The translation “among the holy ones” is quite literal. The Greek word *hagioi*, nearly always awkwardly translated in English as “saints,” literally means “holy ones.”¹⁹⁰ *Hagioi* is used in the Greek Septuagint for Hebrew *qedoshim* (“holy ones”), which is frequently used of divine beings in the divine council. Here are some verses we have seen before:

Job 5:1 - Call now; is there anyone who will answer you? To which of the holy ones (*qedoshim*) will you turn?

Job 15:15 - Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight.

Psalms 89:5 Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! 6 For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the gods is like the LORD, 7 a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him?

Zech 14:5 And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azal. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

The Old Testament also uses the same term for people—specifically of Israelites, the people who would populate Yahweh's kingdom and, after the exile, who are prophesied to re-inherit it.

Psalms 16:3 As for the holy ones in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.

Psalms 34:8 Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! 9 Oh, fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no lack!

Daniel 8:22 ²² As for the horn that was broken . . . ²⁴ His power shall be great—but not by his own power; and he shall cause fearful destruction and shall succeed in what he does, and destroy mighty men and the people who are the holy ones.

Deuteronomy 33:2-3 is especially interesting in that *qedoshim* is used to refer to both humans and divine beings in the same passage:

- 2 “The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us;
he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand.
- 3 Yes, he loved his people, all his holy ones were in his hand;
so they followed in your steps, receiving direction from you.

There’s actually a little more to the terminology than this. We’re all familiar with the commands in the Old Testament “be holy for I am holy.” What isn’t apparent is that the “holy” used of the people at whom the command is directed is actually plural. Here is a literal rendering of one such passage as an example:

Lev 11:44 For I am the Yahweh your God; you are to make yourselves holy, since you are holy ones, for I am holy . . . 45 For I am Yahweh, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God. You are holy ones, for I am holy.

The point is that Israelites were deemed “holy ones,” not because they were perfect (far from it), but because it was God’s intention to make them his family and his ruling authorities on earth—they were to be his kingdom on earth, as it was in Eden. At every stage of this, though, until the physical, incarnate Yahweh was ruling with them as king, and they were made divine through glorification, the kingdom of God was an “already, but not yet” reality. After the kingdom was exiled, Jesus inaugurated it anew at his coming through “his body” (his physical death and resurrection). The result was a new family, but it was also a new council. This new administration’s task was analogous to Adam and Eve’s in Eden. They tended Eden, the earthly domain, headquarters, and temple of Yahweh and his council. The new council does the same, but now the Church is Yahweh’s domain, temple, and headquarters. It is the place he is present and through which his reign is expanding.

Against this backdrop, some New Testament passages take on fresh meaning.

Ephesians 2

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 3

¹⁶ Do you not know that all of you (“you” is plural) are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and all of you (“you” is plural) are that temple.¹⁹¹

Colossians 1

¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.

1 Corinthians 6

¹ When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the holy ones (believers)? ² Or do you not know that the holy ones (believers) will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you (believers), are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!

This last passage is especially telling. Way back in Chapter One when I introduced the divine council I noted *elohim* is a term that denotes any inhabitant of the spiritual world, and terms like “angel” is basically a job description within the spiritual world. Paul tells the bickering believers at Corinth that they will “judge the world” and “judge angels.” What he means is that Christians will replace the sons of God who at present rule the nations, but whom are now under the judgment of Psalm 82. This is why John, speaking to the future destiny of Christians in the book of Revelation this way:

Revelation 2:25 [Jesus is speaking]: Only hold fast what you have until I come.
²⁶ The one who overcomes and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.

Incredibly, this passage quotes Psalm 2:8, where the underlined language describes the messiah. But here the messiah, Jesus, applies the same description *to his children*. Who rules the nations now? They are under the dominion of the corrupt sons of God. God’s new council, the Church, is steadily displacing them. The nations will be given to believers—not another group of angels. Believers will be their judges and replacements.

Jesus, Our Brother in the Council

In my opinion, no other passage in the New Testament is as powerful in its divine council theology than Hebrews 1-2. Once you grasp the divine council worldview, these chapters explode. You'll recognize a lot of terms and ideas we've covered to this point.

Hebrews 1

1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his essence, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 being as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Yahweh's son, Jesus, will inherit all things because he is Yahweh, and Yahweh reclaims the nations. Indeed, Jesus is Yahweh's glory and essence (v. 3). The Greek word behind "essence" is *ὕπόστασις*, and is usually translated "nature" in verse 3. However, this noun often speaks of essence or "actual being."¹⁹² Recall that in our discussion of Wisdom the word "radiance" pointed to Wisdom in the council. Jesus also inherits the name—the essence of Yahweh in Old Testament thinking.

5 For to which of the angels did God ever say,

"You are my Son, today I have begotten you"?

Or again,

"I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son"?

6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

"Let all God's angels worship him."

Jesus is superior to the angels since he was "begotten," which we saw in our Wisdom discussion refers to being "brought forth uncreated." Jesus is the son who deserves worship because he is uncreated—and the essence of Yahweh.

7 Of the angels he says,

"He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire."

8 But of the Son he says,

"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,

the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.

9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;

therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

10 And,

"You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;

11 they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment,
12 like a robe you will roll them up,
like a garment they will be changed.
But you are the same,
and your years will have no end.”
13 And to which of the angels has he ever said,
“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?

Again the point is Jesus’ utter superiority to the angels; he occupies the second throne in heaven as the second Yahweh.

14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

Yahweh’s angels serve believers, those who inherit salvation since they are adopted into Yahweh’s family.

Hebrews 2

1 Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. 2 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, 4 while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Remember Pentecost and the conquest of Bashan?

5 Now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. 6 It has been testified somewhere,

“What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?

7 You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned him with glory and honor,
8 putting everything in subjection under his feet.”

Note that Hebrews is clear—earth wasn’t created to be subject to angels, but to humans. The Old Testament text that Hebrews 2:7 is quoting is Psalm 8:4-6. The Hebrew reads that humankind was created “a little lower than the *elohim*.” And this is how it was in Eden. Humans were not *elohim*—and their pursuit of being like *elohim* caused problems.

Now in putting everything in subjection to him [humankind], he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. 9 But we

see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

The second Yahweh of Hebrews 1, who is the essence of Yahweh, was incarnated as a man to taste death for everyone.

¹⁰ For it was fitting that he [Jesus], for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹² saying,

“I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the council I will sing your praise.”

¹³ And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,

“Behold, I and the children God has given me.”

This is an incredible text. Verse 10 speaks of Jesus, using the same language as Paul in Colossians 1 of Jesus, the co-creator. This same Jesus brought many sons into the family. And he is not ashamed to call them—*us*—his brothers. In fact, he will be the one who introduces us to the council, telling them how wonderful it is to have us as his siblings. “Look at me, everyone—and the siblings Yahweh has given me!”

¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Here is the logic of God’s promise to Eve in Genesis 3. Someday, a human being born from your lineage, will reverse all that you and Adam have done.

But this, too, is “already, but not yet.” We are God’s kingdom . . . waiting for the kingdom to come. But before that reaches its ultimate realization, there’s a lot of ground remaining to be won.

¹⁹⁰ Most English translations have something like “in the saints” here, which makes little sense.

¹⁹¹ 1 Cor. 6:19-20 repeats the thought, though there the “you” is singular, since Paul is talking about each individual believer’s body being where the Spirit resides. Both are obviously true: the Spirit resides in each believer, and collectively the believers are where the Spirit is.

¹⁹² The Greek is usually translated “nature” but it often speaks of “essence” (BDAG, ὑπόστασις).

Chapter 28

Choosing Sides

Anyone who's seen the movie *The Ten Commandments* remembers Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of stone only to be confronted with the sights and sounds of the Israelites worshipping the golden calf (Exod. 32:15-24). Moses thunders: "*Who is on the Lord's side?*"

The demand to choose sides in the holy war that pitted Yahweh against the gods didn't cease with the close of the Old Testament. It's actually found in the New Testament, but in a couple of unlikely places.

Baptism as Holy War

1 Peter 3:14-22 is one of the more puzzling passages of the New Testament. I've actually been in church when the pastor simply announced he was skipping the text because it was too strange. True, it's weird, but it's actually quite comprehensible against the backdrop of the divine council worldview.

1 Peter 3:14-22

¹⁴But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. ¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹And now the antitype—that is, baptism—saves you, not by means of a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

The overall theme of 1 Peter is that Christians must withstand persecution and persevere in their faith. That much is clear in this passage. But what's with baptism, the ark, Noah, and spirits in prison? And does this text say that baptism saves us?

To understand what's going on in Peter's head here we have to understand a concept that scholars have called "types" or "typology." Typology is a kind of prophecy. We're all familiar with predictive verbal prophecy—when a prophet *announces* that something is going to come to pass in the future. Sometimes that comes "out of the blue," with God impressing thoughts on the prophet's mind that he utters. On other occasions, a prophet might take an object or perform some act and tell people that the thing or action prefigures something that will happen. Ezekiel was notorious for this, like the time God told him to shave his head and beard, weigh it the balances, and then burn a third of it, beat a third of it with a sword, and scatter the last third to the wind to visually portray the future of the city of Jerusalem (Ezek. 5:1-12). But we only know what Ezekiel's antics meant because they are spelled out in his prophecies. Ezekiel 5 tells us these are prophecies and what the fulfillment would be. Types work differently.

A type is basically an *unspoken* prophecy. It is an event, person, or institution that foreshadows something that will come, but which isn't revealed until after the fact. For example, in Romans 5:14 Paul tells us that Adam was a *tupos* of Christ. This Greek word means "kind" or "mark" or "type"—it's actually where "typology" comes from. Paul was saying that, in some way, Adam foreshadowed or echoed something about Jesus. In Adam's case, that something was how his act (sin) had an effect on all humanity. Like Adam, Jesus did something that would have an impact on all humanity—his death and resurrection. Another example would be Passover, since it prefigured the crucifixion of Jesus, who was called "the lamb of God." The point is that there was some analogous connection between the type (Adam) and its echo (Jesus), called the "anti-type" by scholars.

So how does this relate to our weird passage in 1 Peter? Peter uses typology in 1 Peter 3:14–22. Specifically, he assumes that the great flood in Genesis 6-8, especially the sons of God event in Genesis 6:1-4, *typify* or foreshadow the gospel and the resurrection. For Peter, these events were commemorated during baptism. That needs some unpacking.

Back in Chapter 6 we saw the tight connections between Genesis 6:1-4 and the epistle of 2 Peter and Jude, whose content mirrors 2 Peter in many ways. Peter and Jude were very familiar with Jewish tradition about Genesis 6 in books like *1 Enoch*, and believed them. *1 Enoch* 6-15 describes how the sons of God (also called "Watchers") who committed the offense of Genesis 6:1-4 were imprisoned under the earth (the Underworld) for what they had done. The Watchers appealed their sentence and asked Enoch, the biblical prophet who never died (Gen 5:21-24), to intercede for them. *1 Enoch* 6:4 puts it this way:

“They [Watchers] asked that I write a memorandum of petition for them, that they might have forgiveness, and that I recite the memorandum of petition for them in the presence of the Lord of heaven.”¹⁹³

God sent back his response by way of Enoch, who went to the imprisoned spirits and announced to them that their appeal had been denied (*1 Enoch* 13:1-3; 14:4-5):

- 1 “And, Enoch, go and say to Asael,¹⁹⁴ ‘You will have no peace.
A great sentence has gone forth against you, to bind you.
- 2 You will have no relief or petition, because of the unrighteous deeds that you revealed, and because of all the godless deeds and the unrighteousness and the sin that you revealed to men.’ ”
- 3 Then I went and spoke to all of them together. And they were all afraid, and trembling and fear seized them.

1 Enoch goes on to describe the prison term as until the end of days—language that refers to the end times.

2 Peter 2:4 (cp. Jude 6) makes specific reference to the episode of Genesis 6:1-4 and the imprisonment of fallen angels in the Underworld. The incident was also on Peter’s mind when he wrote his first epistle—and our strange passage. Peter saw a theological analogy between the events of Genesis 6 and their fallout with the gospel and the resurrection. In other words, he considered these events to be *types* or precursors to New Testament events and ideas.

Just as Jesus was the second Adam for Paul, *Jesus is the second Enoch for Peter*. Enoch descended to the imprisoned fallen angels to announce their doom. 1 Pet 3:14–22 has Jesus descending to these same “the spirits in prison,” the fallen angels, to tell them they were still defeated, despite his crucifixion. God’s plan of salvation and kingdom rule was still intact. In fact, it was right on schedule. The crucifixion actually meant victory over every demonic force opposed to God. This victory declaration is why 1 Pet 3:14–22 ends with Jesus risen from the dead and set at the right hand of God—*above all angels, authorities and powers*.

So how does this relate to baptism? It explains the logic of the passage. Here’s the relevant part once more:

¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,
¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,²⁰because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.²¹And now the antitype—that is, baptism—saves you, not by means of a

removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

The two underlined words in verse 21 need reconsideration in light of the divine council worldview. The word most often translated “appeal” (*eperōtēma*) in verse 21 is best understood as “pledge” here, a meaning that it has elsewhere.¹⁹⁵ Likewise the word “conscience” (*suneidēsis*) does not refer to the inner voice of right and wrong here. Rather, the word refers to “an attitude or decision that reflects one’s loyalty,” a usage that is also found in other contexts.¹⁹⁶

Baptism, then, is not what produces salvation. It “saves” us in that it first involves or reflects a heart decision: a pledge of loyalty to the risen Savior. In effect, baptism in New Testament theology is a loyalty oath, a public avowal of who is on the Lord’s side in the cosmic war between good and evil. But in addition to that, it is also a visceral reminder to the defeated fallen angels. Every baptism is a reiteration of their doom in the wake of the gospel and the kingdom of God. Early Christians understood the typology of this passage and its link back to the fallen angels of Genesis 6. Early baptismal formulas included a renunciation of Satan *and his angels* for this very reason.¹⁹⁷ Baptism was—and still is—spiritual warfare.

Renewing Our Vow

The second historic Christian rite, observing the “Lord’s Table” or communion, also has divine council associations, and again they are not so obvious. This time we need to begin in 1 Corinthians 8:1-6

¹ Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God ⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many gods and many lords— ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.¹⁹⁸

In 1 Cor 8 Paul was writing about whether it was permissible to eat food sacrificed to idols. He decided that it was allowable because “an idol is nothing” (8:4) and people were no better if they ate or abstained (8:8). However, he warned that believers who lack such knowledge should abstain (8:9).

Although Paul bases his decision on the fact that idols are nothing, his comments in verses 4-6 tell us that he knew the entities behind them were real.

Early in our study when I introduced the divine council, I noted that the *Shema* of Deut 6:5, the theological creed of Israel, was worded in such a way that the existence of other gods was not denied (“the Lord *our* God is one”). Paul’s wording in 1 Corinthians 8 has the same feel. In fact, most scholars believe that Paul specifically has the *Shema* in mind.¹⁹⁹

The book of Deuteronomy, in which the *Shema* occurs, of course has several references to other gods as real entities, considering them to be demons (Deut 32:17).²⁰⁰ If the writer of Deuteronomy did not really believe there were other gods, then he would have to deny the existence of demons as well. The writer knew there were other real gods, and so the *Shema* was demanding loyalty to Yahweh (“our God”), not denying the existence of other gods.

Paul, the former Pharisee who knew his Old Testament in fine detail, was echoing this thought. He acknowledges in 1 Corinthians 8 that there are indeed other gods and lords whom people consider gods and lords, but for the believer, there is only one true God—Yahweh.

We can be sure that Paul was thinking of the demonic entities of Deut. 32:17 with regard to this issue since he quotes that verse in 1 Cor 10:14-22.

¹⁴ Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. ¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? ¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. ²² Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? ²³ “All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. ²⁴ Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. ²⁵ Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

Why would Paul be so against eating the food sacrificed to idols here but not in 1 Cor 8? Scholars have puzzled over this for centuries. The divine council worldview helps clarify Paul’s thinking.

Most clearly, the issue of eating the meat sacrificed to idols—which in 1 Corinthians 8:1-6 was connected to lords and gods—is here connected to demons. For Paul the pagan

gods were demons. This makes perfect sense when considered in light of Deuteronomy 32:17, which makes exactly the same connection. It is interesting that Paul isn't completely categorical—he allows that meat sold in the market place can be eaten (10:25)—but is fearful of “provoking God to jealousy” under other circumstances. This phrase is an important clue, for it is lifted from Deut 32:16—the verse right before 32:17, where the gods are called demons. Let's look at the Old Testament passage in context:

- ¹⁵ “But Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat, and kicked;
you grew fat, stout, and sleek;
then he forsook God who made him
and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.
¹⁶ They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods;
with abominations they provoked him to anger.
¹⁷ They sacrificed to demons, not to God (*eloah*=singular),
to gods (*elohim*) they had never known,
new ones that had come recently,
whom your fathers had never dreaded.
¹⁸ You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you,
and you forgot the God who gave you birth.

It's pretty clear that Paul was worried about sacrificing to demons with respect to the whole issue of meat sacrificed to idols. The meat wasn't really the issue; being involved in the sacrifice was. Doing so would be to commit the same sin the ancient Israelites committed, sacrificing to the gods of the nations that had been disinherited. This is why Paul quotes Deut 32:17 as part of his verdict about the meat (1 Cor. 10:19-22):

¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. ²² Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

Apparently some in the Corinthian church had gone beyond eating the meat to actual participation, assuming that since an idol was just piece of wood or stone, it was fine. Paul had to teach them this wasn't the case, and used the Lord's Table as an analogy (1 Cor. 10:14-18):

¹⁴ Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. ¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?

For Paul there was no middle ground. Participation at the Lord's Table meant solidarity with and loyalty to Yahweh. The Lord's Table commemorated not only Jesus' death (1 Cor. 11:23-26) but the covenant relationship Yahweh had with the participants. Violating that relationship by participating in sacrifices to other gods was tantamount to siding with the gods of the nations.

Delivered Unto Satan

Baptism and the Lord's Table were gestures of allegiance. The family of Yahweh was to keep itself whole and faithful to Yahweh. This context also helps us understand a controversial phrase in 1 Corinthians 5.

Within the Church, there were at times lapses of loyalty when members of the "household of faith" (Gal. 6:10) transgressed the moral and doctrinal boundaries set by Yahweh. In such cases, Paul directed believers to remove fellow family members living unrepentantly in sin from the church (1 Cor 5:9-13). More specifically, Paul demanded that the disloyal be "delivered to Satan" (1 Cor 5:5). Paul further noted the goal of such a decision is "for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5:6).

What did Paul mean by these phrases? With respect to the "destruction of the flesh," Paul often used the word "flesh" (*sarkos*) to refer to the physical body, but he sometimes used it to refer to self-sufficiency, worldliness, or an ungodly manner of life.²⁰¹ Since there is no indication that someone expelled from the church was going to die as a result, this second usage makes the most sense in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul is insisting that the unrepentant person be dismissed from the church to live in his or her sin and endure the consequences of their behavior.

But what about being "delivered to Satan"? For that, we need to look to the Old Testament. Recall that the Israelites viewed their land as holy ground and the territory of the non-Israelite nations as controlled by demonic gods. Israel was holy ground because that was where the presence of Yahweh resided. The opposite was true everywhere else.

This perspective shifted after the formation of the Church. God's presence was no longer in the Jerusalem temple, but in the temple which is the body of believers (1 Cor. 3:16-17). That means where a church was, Yahweh was present. Therefore the church was considered "holy ground"; anywhere outside the church was the demonic realm. Hence Paul's thinking. To be expelled from the church—the local manifestation of the place where Yahweh lives—was to be thrust into the realm of Satan.

Casting baptism and the Lord's Table in terms of loyalty to Yahweh might seem a bit edgy. It makes the Church and its institutions sound like an army. It is.

¹⁹³ All the translations in this chapter come from: George W. E. Nickelsburg and Klaus Baltzer, *1 Enoch : A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch* (Includes the text of the Ethiopic book of Enoch in English translation.; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2001), 234-237.

¹⁹⁴ This Watcher is also called Azazel elsewhere (see Chapter 22).

¹⁹⁵ BDAG, 285.

¹⁹⁶ BDAG, 786-787.

¹⁹⁷ For example, see Tertullian: *On the Crown*, 3; *On the Shows*, 4; *On the Soul*, 35.3. See Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology, and Drama* (Cornell, 1985), 94–105.

¹⁹⁸ This passage is nearly always translated with “gods” and “lords” in quotation marks, as though Paul wasn’t serious about what he was saying. The Greek manuscripts have no such punctuation. It is supplied by modern translators who lack the backdrop of the divine council 32 worldview.

¹⁹⁹ See for example, Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 97–99.

²⁰⁰ See my BT article on Deut 32:17.

²⁰¹ BDAG, p. 916; H. R. Balz and G. Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3:231.



Chapter 29

Shock and Awe

We've come to the place in the divine storyline where the present must give way to the future. Many scholars and Bible students have proposed all sorts of things for interpreting what the Bible says about this future conflict, but anything approximating precision in details is not possible. The reason is that, like Old Testament prophecy for the messiah and God's plan was deliberately secretive the first time around (see Chapter 24), so it is with remaining biblical prophecy. In this and the final chapter, my goal is to show you how the divine council / cosmic-geographical worldview we have been exploring sheds significant light on how the long war ends and Christ and his re-constituted council will reign.

A Summary Review

The mythic epic of the Bible began with how God's original intention was to rule over His new terrestrial creation through human imagers, all the while being present with his heavenly imagers—the kingdom of heaven on earth. We saw how it went awry in the wake of God's decision to grant freedom to his imagers, both divine and human. The decision was necessary, for the creature could not truly be like the creator without sharing this attribute, the ability to truly exercise the will and choose between loyalty and rebellion.

What appears to us as a long, drawn out divine plan to restore that which was fallen was equally necessary. It might seem that God could have just stepped in after the fall and eliminated humanity's free will, ensuring a permanent Eden and that would be that. God could not do this and still be victorious due to his own prior decision. Removing freedom from humanity would mean a reversal of the creation of humankind in God's image, for its removal mean that humanity would no longer be like God. Since imaging status was also shared by the other divine beings God had created, the same would be true of them. Reversing these decisions would amount to an admission of failure and defeat. It would also impinge upon God's omniscience and omnipotence. A deity possessing those attributes could find another way to steer the course of creation—seen and unseen—toward the ends he desired and had decreed, all while letting freedom run its course. From our perspective this seems tragic, but only if we consider this terrestrial life. God knows those who are his, and has prepared for them a life beyond this one that “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard” for its wonder and satisfaction. But until the ends are achieved, the long war between good and evil, between God and fallen humanity and corrupted divine beings, would play out.

The reality—and spectre—of freedom placed God in the role of the Grand Influencer. The freedom of imagers meant influence, not removal of freedom, must propel the course

of history. This is not deism in any sense; it is, rather, an acknowledgement of moment-by-moment interest of God in the affairs of human life. God uses his Spirit and other imagers (believing and unbelieving, human and non-human) to prompt those who can embrace salvation to do so, and to live accordingly, advancing his kingdom slowly but unstoppably toward his desired ends. Before the first advent of the Messiah, the ultimate focus of this influence would be the incarnation of Yahweh as Jesus of Nazareth, whose work on the cross would re-establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. Whereas Yahweh was made visible and embodied in the Old Testament as a second Yahweh, now Yahweh would be incarnated as a completely human man. This would be the key to God's ultimate aim, restoring God's original Eden on a global scale, reclaiming the disinherited nations, and widening the human family of God beyond the ethnic descendants of Abraham to all who would be Abraham's seed by faith in the gospel (Gal 3). This program exploded at Pentecost and has continued ever since.

But it's always darkest before the dawn. While the forces of darkness could not see their act of killing Jesus as the key to God's plan, after their blunder they knew full well what had been set in motion. And they would not go quietly. In the mind of these supernatural evil entities, the cause is not lost. They know they are free and have won many victories, and so they believe that the ruination of humankind and the defeat of God's kingdom is still possible. In their darkness they cannot fathom ultimate defeat, and so they persist. The New Testament's description of end times makes it clear that the nations won't be surrendered voluntarily—they will have to be taken back by Yahweh against the will of the fallen. The climax will mean nothing less than apocalyptic war.

The Foe from the Mythological North

In biblical material written before the exile of the southern kingdom of Judah, prophetic descriptions of an enemy from the north referred to a literal attack from a foe whose location was north of Israel, or who approached Israel for that attack from the north. The most obvious example would be Babylon, the nation that took Judah into exile and destroyed Jerusalem (Jer 4:5-8; 20:4-5). In some texts such invasions were described in language associated with chaos—natural upheavals and catastrophes, such as earthquakes (Jer 4:24; Nah 1:5).

This language is part of the “Day of the Lord” theme in the prophets. The “Day of the Lord” (and similar phrases, like “that day”) was a time envisioned by prophets when all the wicked would be punished, whether among the disinherited nations (Obad 15; Zeph. 1:14-18; 2:4-15; Amos 1:13-15; Joel 3:11-12) or the descendants of Abraham (Amos 5:18-20; Joel 1:15). The Day of the Lord is also about salvation. A group of survivors, called the remnant in certain passages (Mic. 4:6-7; Zeph. 3:11-13) will survive and be gathered by Yahweh so they can know Yahweh's presence in their midst (Amos 9:14-15; Zeph. 3:15, 20). These are not only descriptions of an Israelite re-gathering. The remnant includes believing members of the disinherited nations (Isa 2:2-4; 19:18; Zeph. 3:9; Micah 4:1-4; Zech 14:16-17) who will worship in Jerusalem.

That this language is used of the heavens (Joel 2:10) and the primeval deep (Psa 77:19) shows that it concerns more than literal geography. Most of these kinds of passages referred to events already past (e.g., the Babylonian invasion and exile), but passages like Ezek 38 were written during the exile, and so some future enemy and event are in view. Ezekiel 38:18-20 use the language of chaos being unleashed when Yahweh ushers in his future "day" (v. 18) with "great shaking" (v. 19) when he "shakes" the world and destroys the demonic hordes of Gog with fire, and brimstone (v. 20). And, as we discussed in the very first chapter of this book, it is "on that day" that sea dragon Leviathan, the eminent symbol of chaos, will finally be destroyed (Isa 27:1; see also Isa 51:9).

In Chapters 23-25 I traced how the New Testament re-purposes the Old Testament's Bashan motifs. Readers will recall that Bashan, in the far north of Canaan, was a sinister location in the cosmic-geographical worldview of ancient Israelites, and even Gentiles, like the people of Ugarit. Bashan had been an important cult center to Baal; it was the entrance to the Underworld / Sheol, the realm of death—and so, the realm of the *nachash*, later called Satan. In Psalm 68 Bashan was destined for conquest by God. Paul saw this victory as the resurrection and formation of the church (Eph 4). It's clear that Bashan was not only geographical; it was mythological—having to do with cosmic geography and spiritual warfare.

This background information contributes in several ways to eschatology, the biblical drama of end times.

Most generally, it compels us to take some of the language in the book of Revelation in mythic terms (Babylon, the dragon from the sea, earthquakes). Any interpretation of these terms and ideas that binds itself to only a modern, literal scheme of fulfillment is missing the spiritual reality behind them that is just as real. Interpreting prophecy by only modern political events that (seemingly) directly correspond to words in the Bible that are given new, modern meanings will result in the same sort of shock experienced by the first century Jews who found it difficult to process the fulfillment of prophecy presented to them by the apostles. Just as was the case with the messianic mystery, prophecy is invariably oriented to what is going on behind the reality seen with our eyes. It is cryptic, and will burst through into our world in ways unexpected by those looking at the material exclusively through the lens of our own immediate earthly context. This "lack of certainty" in prophetic fulfillment may frustrate us, but God is frankly more concerned with working his plan than satisfying our curiosity. I would suggest, though, that when we consider the eschatological future in ways less bound to our own literal imaginings about fulfillment, it becomes much more dramatic. Three examples will suffice.

The Eschatological Enemy from the North ("Antichrist")

Scholars have longed linked the foe from the north theme with Daniel 11, a passage that many scholars believe in some way relates to the Antichrist. In briefest terms, the reason is that the known invasion of Jerusalem by Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) in 167 B.C. has many elements that are detailed in Daniel 11 (see Chapter 20), where Daniel's eschatological foe is connected to the north many times. Antiochus attacked from the

north (and was from the northern Seleucid empire in Asia Minor). He committed the abominable act of profaning the temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar, made Jewish customs such as circumcision punishable by death. These offenses started a rebellion in Jerusalem that led to a short period of Jewish independence.

Despite the elements of precision noted by scholars between the invasion of Antiochus IV and Daniel 11, there are clear contradictions between the record of Antiochus' invasion and parts of Daniel 11. Additionally, nearly two centuries later Jesus still regarded the prophecy of the abomination of desolation (Dan 9:24-27) as yet to come. Since the abomination spoken of in Daniel 9 is somehow connected to the temple (note the mention of "sacrifice and offering" in Dan 9:27), Antiochus' desecration is considered consistent with the abomination of desolation, but the ultimate fulfillment must be yet future in view of Jesus' own words. As such, it is argued that Antiochus cannot have been the actual fulfillment of Daniel 11 (or the abomination of Daniel 9:24-27) and so historical inconsistencies with Antiochus are of no concern.

Regardless of the Antiochus issue, his association with the northern foe of Daniel 11 nevertheless shows us that the foe from the north motif is important. Later Jewish rabbis and early Christian scholars paid close attention to it. Focusing on the mythic elements opened up a number of interpretive possibilities for understanding the identity of the great enemy in the climactic confrontation between the forces of good and evil.

For example, the enemy name "Gog" in Ezek 38-39 has connections to the demonic cosmic geography associated with the north. The term "Gog" may also reflect a personification of spiritual darkness if it derives from the Sumerian word *gûg*, though this is uncertain.²⁰² The Septuagint text of Amos 7:1 mentions God (the traditional Hebrew text does not) and calls him the king of the locust invasion described in that chapter of Amos. Locust imagery for invading armies is familiar in the Old Testament, but Revelation 9 connects that language with demonic entities from the abyss. This is significant not only since the abyss (a Greek term, *abyssos*) is connected to the Underworld / Sheol, but also because the original offending sons of God of Genesis 6 (cp. 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6; 1 Enoch 6-11). This matrix of ideas may be designed to tell us that the Gog invasion may not describe an earthly enemy but a supernatural demonic enemy. But as we have seen, both reality planes are frequently connected in the biblical epic.

The well-respected early church father Irenaeus saw another connection between the Antichrist and the Underworld and the fallen sons of God of Genesis 6:1-4. Irenaeus knew that in 2 Pet 2:4 the word for the abyss in which these fallen entities was imprisoned was not the expected *abyssos*, but *tartaros*. This word was considered a lower realm than the normal Underworld in Greek mythology.²⁰³ Specifically, it was the place where the quasi-divine giant Titans were imprisoned. "Titans" (*titanos*) was the Greek word used in many Old Testament passages for various giant clan names (e.g., Rephaim). Irenaeus noticed that one of the variant spellings of this word (Teitan) added up to "666" in Greek. Irenaeus favored this answer for the number of the beast since it was not the

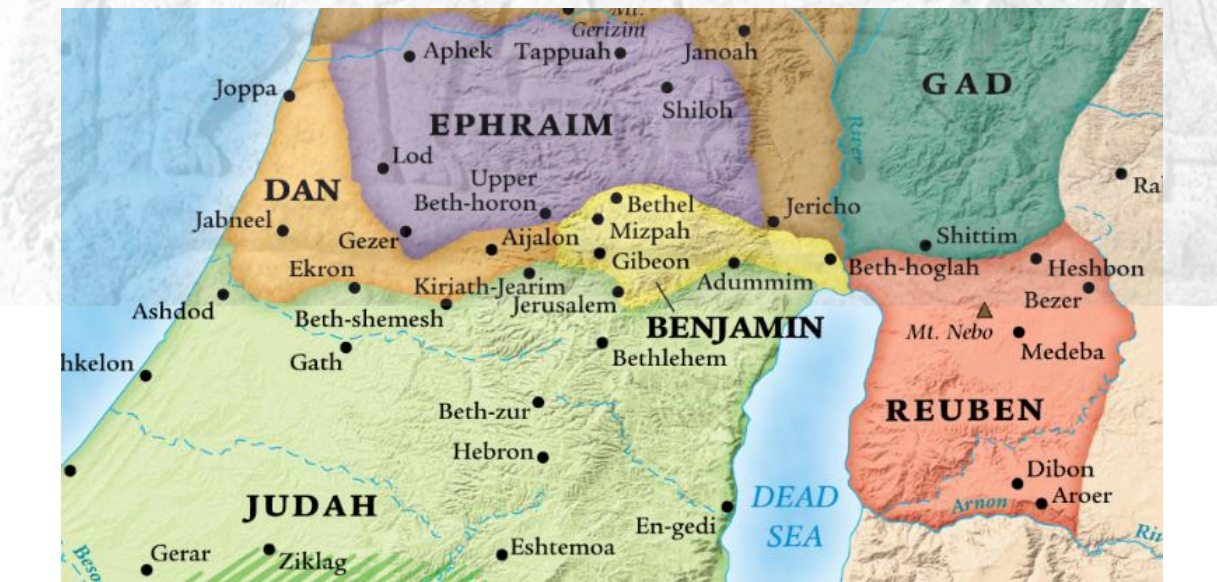
name of a specific ruler or figure, but an evil tyrant, and since the name was connected to the demonic realm.

A third tradition in the thinking of early Christians and Jews connecting the eschatological enemy and cosmic geography is that this enemy would come from the region of Dan (which overlapped with Bashan) or the tribe of Dan, which moved into that northern region after forsaking its original tribal inheritance (see Judges 18).

The tradition of a Dan-Antichrist connection can be found in the early church fathers Irenaeus (2nd century A.D.) and Hippolytus (170-235 A.D.). Their suspicion proceeded along several trajectories.

The tribe of Dan and its genealogy are treated in unusual ways in both the Old and New Testament. In Rev 7:4, we read about 144,000 sealed servants of God “from every tribe of the sons of Israel.” This is not the case as the list of tribes itself indicates, since Dan is absent. The list itself is unlike any other in the Bible in terms of its order. Other than the Dan omission, it has Judah, the tribe of Davidic royalty and of Jesus listed first. The early fathers, along with many modern scholars, believe both unique features are deliberate and driven by theology, since no other coherent literary reason is apparent. Judah is likely listed first since that was the tribe of the Messiah. If this is a correct assumption as to the motivation for that feature, then the omission of Dan may be due to Dan’s Old Testament association with idolatry (Micah and the Levite, Judges 17-18; cp. 1 Kings 12) and the negative association of its geographical proximity to Bashan.

The northern geography of Bashan was not the tribe’s original allotment. Dan migrated (Judges 18) from its original allotment under Joshua in the south, just above Judah:



Dan’s migration positioned it in the northern region of Bashan (Judges 17-18), a region associated with cosmic evil in Old Testament times. This region was also part of the Seleucid Empire during the Second Temple period. The infamous ruler Antiochus

Epiphanes IV, invaded from this region. As noted previously, Antiochus is considered by most scholars to be a foreshadowing of the antichrist since he committed the “abomination of desolation” of Daniel 9:27.



A third trajectory proceeds from certain passages in the Old Testament that appear to cast Dan in a sinister light. In Genesis 49:16-17 we read:

- ¹⁶ “Dan shall judge his people
as one of the tribes of Israel.
¹⁷ Dan shall be a serpent in the way,
a viper by the path,
that bites the horse’s heels
so that his rider falls backward.

Hippolytus took this metaphorical reference, along with its serpentine coloring, as a typological expression of Satanic opposition to Jesus. He further supported his view from the messianic description of Judah in the same chapter of Genesis (49:10). He also observed that only the tribes of Judah and Dan are referred to in the Old Testament as a “lion’s whelp” (Gen 49:9; Deut 33:22). He took this as a deliberate juxtaposition of Judah and Dan—one producing the Christ, the other producing the antichrist.

Jewish writers during the Second Temple period also looked at Dan with suspicion for some of these same reasons. They were obviously not thinking of the antichrist, since the Christian era was yet future. The association of Dan with the northern region of Bashan

was consistent with the Old Testament “foe from the north” motif. The north (*tsaphon*) is also laden with religious-mythological significance. In Ugaritic mythology, *ts-p-n* is the name of the cosmic holy mountain of Baal, the place of the Baal’s council.

Armageddon (Har-Mageddon)

Even people who have never studied the Bible have heard the term “Armageddon.” Anyone who has ever delved into the term has undoubtedly read that the term refers to a battle that will take place at or near Megiddo, the presumed geographical inspiration for the term Armageddon. Further research would perhaps detect the fact that in Zech 12:11 the place name “Megiddo” is spelled in Hebrew with an “n” on the end, solidifying an identification with Megiddo.

Despite the apparent coherence of this identification, it’s unsustainable.

The problems begin with the term itself. In Rev 16:12-16 we read:

¹² The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east. ¹³ And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. ¹⁴ For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ¹⁵ (“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”) ¹⁶ And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

Two items are relevant. First, John tells us explicitly that “Armageddon” is a Hebrew term. That one is obvious. Less apparent is how the name is spelled in Greek in this verse: Harmagedon (Ἀρμαγεδών). The initial “h” in the place name corresponds to the superscripted apostrophe in the Greek characters—what is known as a rough breathing mark in Greek. The Greek language had no letter “h”; it instead used this mark to convey that sound. And so the correct name of the place of this battle is “harmagedon.” This spelling issue becomes significant when we recall the term is actually a Hebrew word. In Hebrew the word “har” means “mountain.” Our place name is therefore Har-Magedon, “Mount of Magedon.” The question then is, what is “Magedon”?

There are two options for understanding “Magedon.” The first is the traditional “Megiddo” the defense of which I sketched above. The meaning of the phrase would be “Mount Megiddo.” Many well-meaning Bible teachers accept this phrase after looking at pictures of Megiddo, like the one below:



The problem is that this is an archaeological *tell* – an artificial mound created by successive layers of building and occupation over millennia. It is not a mountain, and there are no mountains in the entire region. It is at this point where Zech 12:11, the proof text for “Magedon” being Megiddo because of the “n” at the end of the Hebrew spelling actually dooms Megiddo as an identification. Take a look at the verse in its entirety in context (vv. 10-11):

¹⁰ “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. ¹¹ On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo(n).”

It is clear that the verse refers to a location where the Messiah will appear and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will “look on him whom they have pierced.” This will occur at the battle of Armageddon (Rev 19:11-21). Equally clear is the fact that Megiddo *is a plain*, not a mountain! As we shall see, John was thinking about this odd spelling of Megiddo with an “n” (the only time in the Hebrew Bible where this spelling occurs), but he was not referencing it for the location of the battle. That brings us to our second option for deciphering “Magedon.”

To those who do not know Hebrew, “Megiddo” seems like an obvious explanation for “Magedon” since both words have m-g-d. But in Hebrew there are actually two letters

that get spelled “g” in Greek (and English translations, too). “Megiddo” is spelled as follows

mem – gimel – daleth
M - G - D

The same “m-g-d” can be represented another way:

mem – ‘ayin – daleth
M -  - D

Neither Greek nor English have a letter (other than their hard “g”) that approximates the sound of ‘ayin, which is made in the back of the throat and sounds similar to hard “g”. This is why there is no English letter for its transliteration. Rather, the superscripted left parenthesis is used. Perhaps the best example of a Hebrew word that begins with the letter ‘ayin but is represented by “g” in English is “Gomorra^h.” That familiar word is not spelled with *gimel*, the “g” in “Megiddo.” It is spelled with ‘ayin.

The above means that the Hebrew phrase behind John’s Har-Magedon is actually Har M-‘-D. Amazingly, this phrase exists in the Hebrew Bible as *har mo‘ed*. It is found in Isaiah 14:13, a passage many readers will immediately recognize in its context—the passage associated with the fall of the Shining One (“Lucifer” in Latin) after exalting himself against God (see Chapter 6):

- 12 “How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
- 13 You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly (= *har mo‘ed*)
in the far reaches of the north;
- 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.’
- 15 But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the far reaches of the pit.

The phrase *har mo‘ed* is the dwelling place of the divine council—the mountain of assembly where the Most High dwells and holds court. The phrase would have been familiar to Israelites and Jews familiar with their Bible, since other Semitic languages and cultures have the same phrase for the meeting place of the gods.

These data mean that the final, apocalyptic show down will have something to do with the meeting place of the divine council, God's abode. Two questions remain: where is that and why the "n" in the spelling?

The first question is very easy, and you probably already know the answer. The God of Israel dwelled at Jerusalem, and so Jerusalem is his place of council. The final battle will take place at Jerusalem, or have Jerusalem, the holy city, as its central concern. The goal of such a battle is the destruction of the kingdom of God and the capturing of Yahweh's "portion" of cosmic geography—a reversal of the advancing kingdom that began with Jesus' appearance and Pentecost.

We can be sure of this identification for other reasons. Jerusalem did have a mountain (Mount Zion). Jerusalem is also cast as the great cosmic mountain in Psalm 48:1-2:

¹ Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God!
His holy mountain, ² beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.

Recall that, to Canaanites, the mount of assembly was not Jerusalem, but Baal's mountain in "the heights of the north." We discussed this passage and this phrase back in Chapter 13. The psalmist is denying that the real cosmic mountain is Baal's mountain; rather, it is Zion. The psalmist would obviously know Jerusalem and Mount Zion were not in the literal geographical north of the Promised Land—it is in the south. But by situating Zion in "the heights of the north," the psalmist is declaring that Yahweh and his council—not Baal—rule the cosmic world. The powers of darkness must have Jerusalem fall to regain what they have lost to the kingdom of God.

As far as the "n" at the end of the word, John adopted the odd spelling found in Zech 12:11 not because he wanted to point to Megiddo as a location (since that verse clearly calls Megiddo a plain, as it indeed is) but to link the visible return of the Messiah in Zech 12:10 with the final cosmic-geographical conflict for the destiny of earth. In other words, by taking the familiar and theologically-charged term *har mo'ed* and adding the "n" to it from Zech 12:11, John effectively unites the theological imagery of Isa 14:13 and Zech 12:10.

John's book of Revelation is well known to scholars for combining Old Testament passages and their imagery in this way. The classic example is the divine council throne room scene in Rev 4-5, where John combines imagery from Daniel and Ezekiel. The imagery from Daniel 7 is especially telling, as that was the divine council scene in which the kingdom of God was announced and the fate of the final beast was settled (see Chapter 21).

Armageddon: A Battle of Gods and Men

John alludes to another passage in Zechariah that connects Armageddon and the Day of the Lord with the divine council. In Rev 19:11-16, the climax of the battle, we read:

¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

The underlined portion describing a divine army coming with Jesus to end the conflict of Armageddon is an allusion to Zech 14:5, which reads, on context, as follows:

³ Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. ⁴ On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward. ⁵ And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azal. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

The passage from Zechariah clearly associates the final battle with Jerusalem, as our understanding of the term “Armageddon” asserted. In point of fact, all the Old Testament background passages to a final battle with evil are consistent in placing the conflict at Jerusalem, not Megiddo. John’s use of the imagery also subtly connects Jesus with Yahweh, since John has Jesus coming to earth, but Zechariah has it as Yahweh (v. 3). Lastly, the “holy ones” (*qedoshim*) accompany Yahweh/Jesus to end the conflict. The divine council is also present in other prophetic calls to war (Isa 13:4-5; 40:26).

We have considered this term before, noting that it can be used of both divine beings (“angels”) and believers. In the New Testament, “holy ones” is the Greek term *hagioi*. Interestingly, this passage from Zechariah is actually referenced by four other New Testament books:

Matthew 25:31 - “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

1 Thess 3: 12 - ... may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, 13 so that he may establish your hearts

blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

2 Thess 1:7 and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Jude 14 - It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, 15 to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

It is easy to see that two of these passages retain the ambiguous “holy ones,” which can speak of divine beings or believers, while two clearly have “angels.” John merely refers to an army from heaven.

I would suggest that the ambiguity is deliberate on John’s part, and can be taken as indicating that the army of Jesus at his return includes both divine beings and glorified believers, who have taken their place in the heavenly council and now return to earth to displace the gods of the nations, claiming the globe for Yahweh. As we saw in Chapter 27, the New Testament doctrine of glorification includes the idea of human believers being adopted into God’s family. They are the new “sons of God” who will rule and reign with God’s non-human sons as originally intended in Eden. This theme of divine sonship and eschatological rule of believers is evident elsewhere in the book of Revelation, and it is that to which we now turn.

²⁰² Cited from Block, *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 25-48* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997-c1998), p. 433; footnote 31. Block cites the study of P. Heinisch, *Das Buch Ezechiel übersetzt und erklärt*, HSAT 8 (Bonn: Hanstein, 1923, p. 183).

²⁰³ See BDAG, p. 991.

Chapter 30

Ruling Over Angels

The conquest of evil at Armageddon removes the final obstacle to reclaiming the nations disinherited at Babel (Deut 32:8-9), the demise of the corrupt sons of God who were ruling those nations (Psa 82:6-8). In the distant past, God had disinherited the nations of earth as his co-ruling family, the original Edenic design, choosing instead to create a new family from Abraham (Deut 32:8-9). The disinherited nations were put under the authority of lesser *elohim* sons of God. Having become corrupt, they were sentenced to mortality (Psa 82:6-8). The Old Testament is basically a record of the long war between Yahweh and the gods, and between Yahweh's children and the nations, to re-establish God's presence on earth in rule—again, the original Edenic design. Though Yahweh's victory began with the ministry of Jesus, the incarnation of the second Yahweh, the conflict ended at Armageddon, a victory that would usher in the new earth, a global Eden to be ruled by Christ with his reconstituted council of glorified believers.²⁰⁴ In this final chapter, we'll take a look at how this picture is telegraphed in the book of Revelation and elsewhere.

An Epic Summary

We spent some time in Chapter 27 outlining the New Testament's use of sonship, family, and adoption terminology for believers (e.g., Gal 3:7-9, 23-28; John 1:11-12; 1 John 3:1-3; 2 Pet 1:2-4; Gal 4:4-6; Rom 8:15-23; Eph 1:4-5). The logic of this language should be quite evident by now. In ages past the divine sons of God watched as Yahweh created the world (Job 38:7-8). Yahweh then announced to his council his intention to create humans who would be his imagers, a status his divine sons also shared (Gen 1:26-27). Originally, the council headquarters and Yahweh's abode was on earth in Eden; God's imagers, divine and human, would both represent him in this new world.

The original intent was ruined by the rebellious acts of one divine being, the Shining One, who tempted humanity, and the transgressions of both Adam and Eve. The humans were drive out of God's home and his council to live in the wonderful created world, unprotected from its natural threats, doomed to image under duress and to die as mortals. But God promised that one day, a human being from the line of Eve would come and undo what had happened. The rest of the Bible is the story of God's efforts, within the context of the freedom he had given humanity and his divine sons, to bring about that new Eden through this Human One. It is for this reason that, throughout the Bible, the

terminology of divine family and divine rule run intertwined. The book of Revelation takes up both themes and, naturally, they are inseparable.

The Ones Who Overcome: Eternal Life with God

The book of Revelation frequently describes believers as those who “overcome” the assault of evil described in the book by retaining their faith in Christ, the Lamb of God who is the beginning and the end (see the use in Rev 12:11). On six occasions the term is used in conjunction with the reward of eternal life in God’s Edenic home as part of his family:

Rev 2:7 - He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

Rev 2:11 - He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’

Rev 2:17 - He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’²⁰⁵

Rev 3:5 - The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels (for this confession, compare Heb 2:10-13).

Rev 3:11 I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

Rev 21:6 And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

Each of these passages affirms the eternal life of the believer, but the language goes deeper, especially with the divine council worldview in mind. There is clear Edenic imagery for the place where the believer will spend eternity (Rev 2:7). Revelation 2:11 is also Edenic, though perhaps less transparent. The first death refers to physical death, brought by Adam’s sin and expulsion from Eden. Since all humans, believers and unbelievers, are resurrected before judgment, the second death is the final judgment (Rev 21:8).

Revelation 2:17 evokes the imagery of manna, the supernatural food that sustained the lives of the Israelites during their journey to the Promised Land (Exod 16). It was the bread from heaven, an analogy Jesus used of himself as the source of eternal life (John 6:31-58). Based on parallels found in Second Temple period Jewish literature, the white stone was a symbol of legal acquittal or a token of membership among the righteous. The meaning is therefore very similar to believers receiving white robes referenced in Rev 3:5. The idea of confessing those who overcome before the Father in Rev 3:5 echoes a passage we looked at in Chapter 27, Heb 2:10-13, where Jesus presents his new siblings (believers) to the council and the Father. Believers are pure (white robes) before that great cloud of heavenly witnesses. The “cloud of witnesses” language naturally evokes the language of the council in the clouds (Psa 89:5-8). The heavenly witnesses in Hebrews includes believers who have died and met the Lord before the final conflict (Heb 11; Rev 2:9-11).

Revelation 3:11 uses temple imagery and vocabulary. As we saw in earlier chapters, the temple was decorated with Edenic iconography to recall the original dwelling place of God on earth. Prior to the final consummation of the kingdom on earth in the new Eden, the dwelling place of God was within the believer, and within believers corporately (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19-20). Other New Testament writers draw on the imagery of the Israelite Tabernacle, the dwelling place of God, to describe the presence of God within believers (e.g., 2 Cor 5:1-4).

Rev 21:6 is the most explicit link between divine sonship and “overcoming.” Those who overcome will inherit Yahweh’s inheritance, a term that specifically draws on the Deuteronomy 32:8-9 worldview of the Old Testament, where Israel was Yahweh’s inheritance in place of the nations—but which would be the conduit to reclaim the earth. Believers inherit that dominion with Christ and God. God will call each believer “my son.”

The Ones Who Overcome: Eternal Rule with Jesus

The focus of the inheritance allusion in Rev 21:6 overlaps with the “overcomer” language in other parts of the book of Revelation. Other occurrences of the phrase specifically point to shared rulership of the new Eden, Yahweh’s global inheritance.

Rev 2:26 The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, 27 and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. 28 And I will give him the morning star.

Rev 3:21 The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

The latter passage is startling, even given the impact of the divine council worldview we have been tracking. Believers will share the throne of Christ, the very one he sat upon with the Father at his exaltation. There can simply be no more powerful statement of shared dominion.

The same thought is actually echoed in Rev 2:26-28. Believers will rule the nations with “a rod of iron,” a phrase that comes from Psa 2:9, one of the clearest messianic psalms in the Old Testament. John uses the same quotation elsewhere in Revelation of Jesus, in reference to his birth (Rev 12:5) and his victory at Armageddon (Rev 19:15).

The statement “I will give him the morning star” must be understood in light of the comment in the immediately preceding verse, “even as I myself have received authority from my Father” and the subsequent use of “morning star” in 22:16. The phrase in Rev 22:16 refers to Jesus himself. I am in agreement with most scholars who believe that the morning star reference is an allusion to Num 24:17, where it is associated with the messianic tribe of Judah and messianic rule (see the word “scepter” in Num 24:17). Stars were associated with divinity in the ancient world. The ruling divine messiah at the climax of history is Jesus, so he is the morning star of Rev 22:16. Giving the believers who overcome the morning star refers to believers sharing in the messianic kingdom rule.

This outcome and interpretation of the role of believers in this shared rule should be no surprise given Daniel 7. In Chapter 21 we saw that this shared rulership was specifically prophesied in that chapter. In Dan 7:9-10 the human one (“son of man”)—referred to as riding on the clouds, the familiar Yahweh description—receives an everlasting kingdom from the Ancient of Days during the meeting of the divine council. That kingdom belongs to the son of Man, Jesus Christ, and his rule is shared by the members of his council (“holy ones”; Dan 7:22) and believers (“people of the holy ones of the Most High”; Dan 7:27).

All of this helps us make good sense of what looks like a throwaway line in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. In trying to convince believers not to take fellow believers to court, Paul rebukes them by saying, “Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!” The divine council structure and what we have seen in the book of Revelation brings this statement to life.

Post-Babel / Pre-Armageddon Council Structure	Role of Rank	Believers
The Godhead	Ultimate Sovereignty	
Sons of God ²⁰⁶	Ruling the disinherited nations	Displace the corrupt sons of God as overcomers
Angels	A term of low rank, delivering messages	

The chart illustrates the thinking behind Paul's rebuke. When believers inherit the nations as "overcomers," they therefore outrank divine beings of lesser rank, the angels. Though there is shared authority for administering the new global Eden spread to all God's children, human or not, there is rank and authority. Believers are the new sons of God chosen to rule all nations as Yahweh's complete inheritance.

The End of Chaos and Restoration of Eden

The Eden imagery at the end of the book of Revelation is very obvious, as that can be the only context for the tree of life:

Revelation 22

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.

¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.

¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

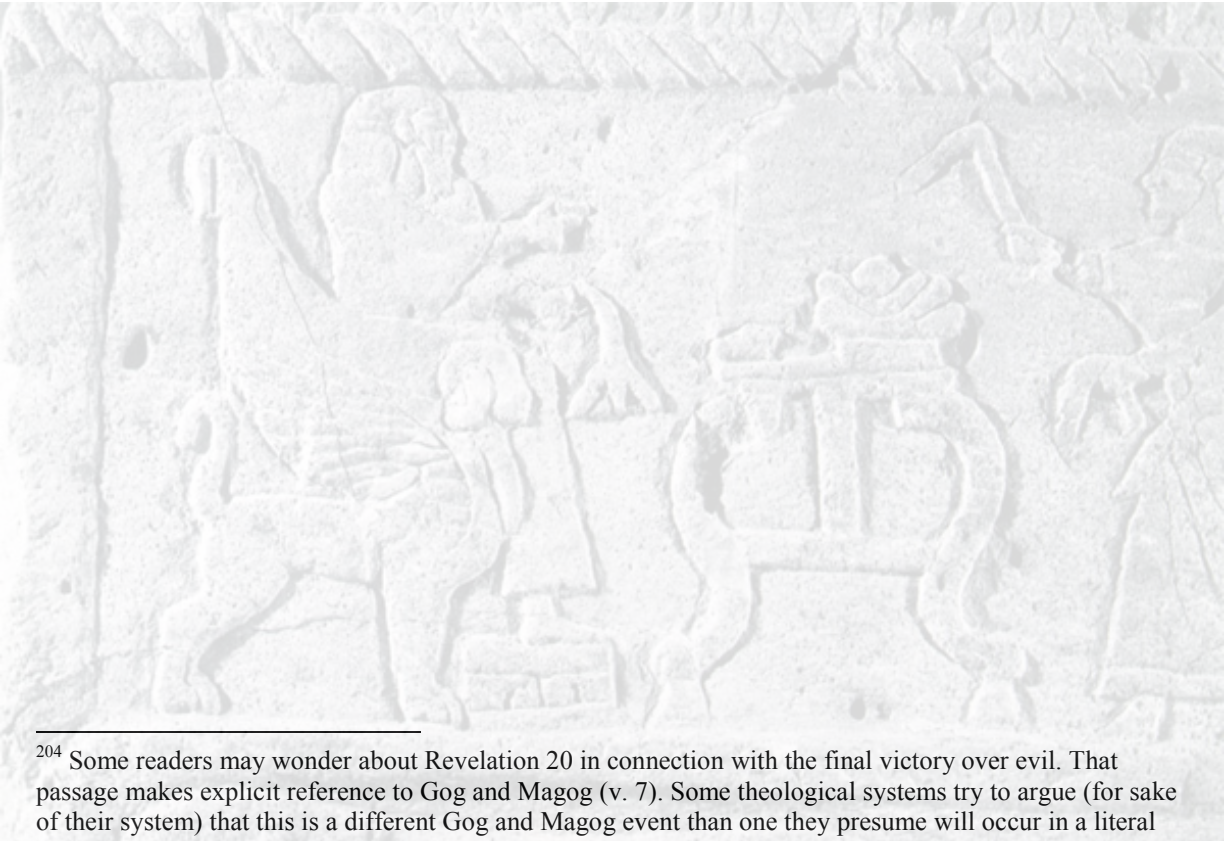
Notice that the tree of life is specifically now for "the healing of the nations," a clear reference to the reclaiming of the nations turned over to lesser gods at Babel (Deut 32:8-9). The effect is also described "no longer will there be anything accursed," a reversal of the curses of the Fall. The other two tree of life references naturally link the eternal life of the believer to being present in Eden—the place where God, the source of all life, dwells.

The Old Testament alludes to the reversal of the curse and the coming global kingdom in striking ways that echo the Edenic conditions:

- All those formerly sick or disabled would be restored to full health (Isa 29:18–19; 30:26; Mic 4:6–7)
- All will enjoy a supernatural abundance of milk, honey, fruit, and produce (Isa 4:2; 7:21–22; 25:6–9; 30:23–24; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13–15).
- There will be peace throughout all creation (Hos 2:18; Isa 11:1–10; cf. Ezek 34:25–28); and all Israel (Isa 10:20; 52:6; Ezek 39:22)
- All nations (Isa 19:19–25; cf. Ezek 38:23), will know that Yahweh is God.

This imagery, especially extending the tree of life to all the nations, globalizes Eden. In so doing, chaos is eradicated from God's creation. Isaiah 27:1 had said this would happen in conjunction with the Day of the Lord (Armageddon), and John agrees. With evil defeated and banished and a global Eden, there is finally no more sin. With chaos eliminated, nothing can harm the believer in an eternal life with God. But John makes an even more telling statement of the end of chaos in Rev 21:1, one of my favorite verses in the Bible. For those who have not read this book, it means nothing, but for you my readers, it encapsulates the entirety of the biblical epic, the myth that is true. I'll let it be my conclusion:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, *and the sea was no more.*



²⁰⁴ Some readers may wonder about Revelation 20 in connection with the final victory over evil. That passage makes explicit reference to Gog and Magog (v. 7). Some theological systems try to argue (for sake of their system) that this is a different Gog and Magog event than one they presume will occur in a literal tribulation. I reject that idea, since it arbitrarily adds a second Gog and Magog event only on the basis of preserving a system. Seeing another Gog and Magog event has no basis in the text itself. Aside from the foe from the north motif, there are several textual indicators that demonstrate Armageddon is the event described in Ezek 38-39 that are beyond the scope of this manuscript. Those will be placed, with bibliography, on the future website www.themyththatistrue.com when the site becomes live. Connecting Ezek 38-39 to Armageddon also requires that at least part of the book of Revelation recapitulates (i.e., repeats in cycles). This is the dominant scholarly view of the book, not the popular one ("Left Behind" approach) which wants to read Revelation only in as a linear chronology. Lastly, though I believe the Armageddon battle and the battle of Rev 20 (Gog and Magog) are the same event, I reject the notion that this rules out an earthly kingdom of God. It would rule out the idea that a 1000 year millennium is the point of Revelation 20, but that issue is separate from an earthly kingdom. Chapter 30 sketches my view that the new earth is not just descriptive of an eternal state, but an eternal kingdom of God on earth ruled by God's glorified human and divine families—Eden restored, with God's imagers as his (Christ's) ruling administration.

²⁰⁵ Manna was the supernatural food that sustained the lives of the Israelites during their journey to the Promised Land (Exod 16). It was the bread from heaven, an analogy Jesus used of himself as the source of eternal life (John 6:31-58). Based on parallels found in Second Temple period Jewish literature, the white stone was a symbol of legal acquittal or a token of membership among the righteous. The meaning is therefore very similar to believers receiving white robes.

²⁰⁶ Recall that there were seventy nations in the Table of Nations in Gen 10, the same as the traditional number of the sons of El at Canaan. This would be a subset of the heavenly host given the language of innumerability applied to them elsewhere. “Sons of God” is a rank term, not an ontological one, and so the biblical writer informs us that certain of the sons of God had this rank and task. The structure of the earthly kingdom of God mimics this number elsewhere (see Chapter 15).

